THE IMPERIAL UNCLE
DA FENG GUA GUO
Translated by E. Danglars

The Imperial Uncle

Da Feng Gua Guo

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Chapter One

I am an imperial uncle, an uncle to the emperor.

However, I am not a direct uncle but a cousin once removed. My father was brother to Mingzong, the Tongguang emperor,[1] grandfather of the present emperor. I am only His Majesty's cousin-uncle.

But with the late emperor's own brothers having long since died off, I, a mere cousin-uncle, have become an uncle dearer than any true uncle.

Those mawkish words, "dearer than any true uncle," were not spoken by me, but by the empress dowager.

The first time she spoke these words, the emperor had yet to ascend the throne. The late emperor was newly deceased. Red-eyed and dressed in her mourning garb, she said to me, *Chengjun, though you are the late emperor's cousin, in my heart I have always seen you as an uncle. You are Qizhe's dearest uncle, dearer than any true uncle.*

At the time, I was deep in mourning for the late emperor, and her words chilled me.

It was no surprise when she added at once, *Going forward, Qizhe will have to rely on your help, Chengjun. I request that favor of you now.*

Afterward, my mother summarized the situation perfectly. She said, *When those close to the throne have a use for you, you are dearer than anything. When they have no use for you, they want you to hurry up and die.*

When the emperor's personal reign had begun and his throne was as fast as if it had been cast in molten iron, I met the empress dowager on occasion in my comings and goings at the imperial palace, and as she regarded me, she did appear to be willing me to go wait upon the late emperor as soon as possible.

It seems that the late emperor and those close to him once saw my father in the same light. After so many years of anticipation, the late emperor had at last lived to see my father interred. I thought that he should have been able to die in peace, his burden lifted. But the misfortunes of one generation came down to the next: the late emperor's wife and son inherited his ways and went on suspecting me.

This would not end until I, too, was in my coffin.

An idle observer once produced a summation of the present imperial court's three great malignant tumors:

Wang Qin's greed is too great for the treasury to slake.
Yun Tang ignores his post and toils for his faction's sake.
And then the manipulative Prince Huai, chief of all poisons,
Comes with his treachery to make the throne quake.

This chief of all poisons, this evil manipulator, this greatest of malignant tumors, refers to none other than me, Prince Huai, Chengjun.

Faced with this view, I can only profess myself helpless.

Actually, I have always been very dutiful and loyal. I have neither the intent to seize power nor the desire to covet the throne. I assert that no other minister of this court surpasses me in loyalty.

But the tragedy of it is that hardly anyone in the world believes in my loyalty. However, I have always been open to reason. In deference to reason, I will say that the greatest fault in causing others to doubt me lies with my father.

I remember my mother often saying to me when I was young, *Your father is the greatest fool I have ever met.* Then she would stroke my head and say, *You must not grow up to be like him.*

In the eyes of outsiders, my father was nowhere near foolish. He went into battle for the first time at fifteen and became commander in chief at seventeen. Half his life was spent in the saddle, and the defeats he suffered were vanishingly few.

But to my mother, and to myself once I was old enough to understand, my father was in fact very simpleminded.

He was the Tongguang emperor's youngest brother. He often recalled with ardent tears standing in his eyes how the Tongguang emperor had loved and cared for him when he was young, taught him to read and write, tucked him in at night, dressed him in extra layers when it was cold… and he was willing to lay down his life to repay his imperial brother's kindness.

But the Tongguang emperor was frail and died young; my father had hardly any opportunity to repay him. After weeping bitterly in inconsolable grief, he resolved to extend his repayment to the Tongguang emperor's son—the late Yingchang emperor, the present emperor's father.

If there was an incident at the border, he immediately volunteered to set forth. In political discussions at court, if he thought he could aid the government and the state in any way, he was sure to pour out his views, regularly becoming voluble and impassioned. His sincere advice often grated on the ear; he believed he was acting out of loyalty, but in the eyes of the emperor, he was attempting to make himself look good at His Majesty's expense. One calls this presumption.

My mother once counseled him on this subject, but he wouldn't listen. He thought that she was being womanish. When heaven and earth bore witness to the unfaltering loyalty in his heart, when the sun and moon reflected it, how could his nephew the emperor fail to sense it?

My mother was powerless. She could only watch him carry his foolishness through to the end.

After my father died, his military authority was immediately ceded and evenly split among a number of important ministers. All I inherited was his title. I did not undertake a position in any court ministry. The present emperor has a number of other imperial cousin-uncles apart from me, each holding the rank of prince, each with more power than Huai Manor. Regardless, for whatever reason, outsiders always think that Huai Manor must be in possession of some secret influence sufficient to overthrow the government.

Just after the death of the late emperor, when the empress dowager spoke those mawkish words to me, I had no choice but to give her an empty promise. How was I to know some of my older cousins and a number of important courtiers would hold a small conference that very night and bring me along. Grand Tutor Yun Tang, who was still imperial chancellor at the time, said, "The nation cannot go without a ruler for a single day, yet since His Majesty's passing, the throne has stood empty two days already. The crown prince, Qizhe, is still young. What say you, princes and assembled gentlemen?"

When my turn came, I spoke honestly: "It is right and proper for the crown prince to succeed to the throne. In the meantime, I will say irreverently that I have known His Highness Qizhe since he was born. He has always been clever and quick-witted, generous and benevolent. Though he is still young, when he grows up, he is certain to be a wise ruler." While telling the truth, I also took the opportunity to flatter the future emperor. I thought that ought to improve my life going forward.

The next day, Qizhe succeeded to the throne and became emperor. That night, the empress dowager summoned me to the palace. In the imperial study, she dismissed the attendants. Holding the emperor by the hand, she said, "Your Majesty,

now that you are emperor, you must not forget your imperial uncle Prince Huai's contributions. From now on, in matters of government, Prince Huai will certainly assist Your Majesty."

The empress dowager's gaze was pregnant with meaning. I wanted to explain that she must have misunderstood something, but I could not.

This is how people are. The more you deny something to them, the more they believe it is the truth.

Day by day, the secret influence of Huai Manor waxed in others' imaginations, and especially in the imagination of the empress dowager.

So up to today, it had been my honor to be the court's foremost scheming minister, a treacherous prince in the minds of people throughout the nation.

Today was the second day of the fourth month.

The month and the day were both even—a propitious date according to the calendar, suitable for raising house beams, matrimony, bathing, and travel.

I sat in my front hall.

Also in the front hall were two guests: one Yun Tang's son Yun Yu, the other a minor imperial censor recently promoted to the Censorate.

As one of the court's three great tumors, Yun Tang was a tumor only slightly smaller than myself, and unlike me, his reputation was not unmerited. Just look at his son, Yun Yu; in his early twenties, he already held three or four concurrent positions at court, among them supervisor of the Imperial Censorate. This brand-new minor imperial censor was probably some years older than Yun Yu, yet he had no choice but to treat him with utmost deference and allow himself to be dragged here to visit me.

"Censor He is an exceedingly rare talent," Yun Yu said to me soberly, "but he is still young and inexperienced. I hope Your Highness Prince Huai will look after him."

Then he turned with a smile to Censor He, who was on his best behavior and stiff as a coffin with it. "His Highness Prince Huai, you ought to know, is not merely His Majesty's uncle. He is also the imperial uncle dearest to His Majesty."

I was numb to these words after so many years of hearing them. I gave the minor imperial censor a cordial smile. It was an exceedingly ordinary visit—or so it ought to have been.

And then my princess barged in.

Another nephew of mine, Qili, eldest son and heir of Prince Shou, once scolded me: *Imperial Uncle, you're fine in every way, except that no matter what happens and when, you always think that all the justice in the world is on your side; everything must always be someone else's fault, and you've been dreadfully wronged. This is an aggravating habit of yours.*

I have always thought he was wrong to say this; I didn't deserve it. I have always examined myself regularly. Whenever anything happens, I first try to find fault with myself, and it is only because I usually find nothing amiss in my own conduct that I go looking for fault with others.

Just like this time: I looked at the princess, as ever examining my conscience. Had I truly done something to make her take such drastic action?

After a brief period of self-examination, I found that I had done nothing wrong.

In the years since the princess had married into Huai Manor, I had honored her, provided for her—if she wanted gold, I would never give her silver. If she wanted to wear silk, I would never dress her in satin.

I had never said a harsh word to her, nor taken a concubine.

So why—

The princess's back was straight, her head held high and her chest thrust out. She said, "Your Highness, I'm expecting! It's not yours, of course!"

The hall went silent.

Censor He's face was white with shock. Yun Yu snickered.

The princess turned and pointed to a figure standing by the small door leading from the front hall to an inner room, bundled up like a zongzi dumpling wrapped in bamboo leaves. "I am not afraid to tell Your Highness that the child in my belly is mine and his!"

Censor He looked desolate. Trembling, he climbed stiffly to his feet and made to leave. Yun Yu tugged on his sleeve and forced him to sit down, while he himself went on watching with a smile.

The princess looked at me as tears streamed down her face. "This is what I have done today!" she said fiercely. "I wanted to say this out in the open! What is Your Highness going to do to me?!" She fixed on me a gaze like a knife. "I wanted to tell you! It is you who drove me to this, Your Highness! It is you who drove me step by step to where I am today! I would rather die than continue to endure! I will fight to the death if I must in order to destroy your reputation!"

Her eyes were bright red, filled with a flesh-gnawing, bone-cutting hatred for me. "Your Highness, why will you not speak?! Why do you not dare to reprimand me,

not dare to have me expelled? Because you don't have the gall! Because you owe me!"

I heard a sip. It was Yun Yu drinking his tea. Holding the teacup, he continued to observe with relish.

The princess took a step forward. She glared ferociously at me. "Because you're afraid the whole world will know that Prince Huai, Chengjun, is an impotent cutsleeve!"[2]

History's most humiliating events were taking place at Huai Manor today.

A teacup touched the table with a clatter. Yun Yu said, "Princess, let me speak fairly as an outsider. As far as impotence is concerned, you are bringing a false charge. His Highness Prince Huai has quite a few times gone with us to visit the streets of ill repute. Though he does have some preference for men, I and others can attest, along with those boys and girls at the brothels, that His Highness Prince Huai is quite accomplished in matters of intimacy. I assure you that no one has anything to say against him."

The princess laughed savagely, rocking back and forth, her breath coming short.

She pointed at me. "Do you know that you've ruined my life? I hate you! Alive or dead, I won't let you get away with it! Make no mistake, today I intend to create a scandal for outsiders to see! I want the whole world to know that Prince Huai is a cuckold!"

She pointed again at the zongzi next to the small door. Chuckling, she said, "Well? Your Highness? Aren't you surprised to see who my lover is? How does Your Highness plan to punish us?"

The zongzi slowly raised his head and looked at me with clear eyes.

Pain pounded in my temples, making my head spin.

I wanted to say to the princess, *You're wrong. I am not the prime culprit behind bringing about this scene here and now.*

The princess had been married to me for several years, and in fact, we had never had marital relations. But it wasn't because I didn't want to; it was because she was unwilling.

The princess was the daughter of Li Yue, a minister famed for his loyalty. In a court polluted by three malignant tumors, Secretariat Director Li Yue was like a white pillar in a raging current of filth. The late emperor and the present empress dowager had relied heavily on him. In the end, he had overworked himself and died suddenly in his office at the age of forty-six.

While still in the first flush of youth, when I reached the age to marry, the empress dowager feared that I would marry Wang Qin's or Yun Tang's daughter, combining two great tumors into one, so she personally arranged to betroth Li Yue's daughter to me—so that Li Yue could act as a check on me.

I was quite pleased to marry her. Young Mistress Li was renowned throughout the capital. She was said to be strikingly beautiful, and skilled at music, the game of weiqi, calligraphy, and painting. What young man wouldn't desire a beauty like this? I even had inquiries made and learned that her gracious name was Ruru, that her favorite colors were pale yellow and carmine, and that she enjoyed the poetry of Bai Juyi. I all but climbed the wall of Li Yue's house myself to write lines of Bai Letian's[3] poetry on leaves and toss them into the garden under her window.

But later I heard that when Young Mistress Ruru learned she was to marry me, she cried her heart out and refused to take her meals. She did not want to wed a treacherous prince like me. Li Yue and his wife reasoned with her, and after several days of persuasion, Young Mistress Ruru at last resolved that, for the sake of the people, she would martyr herself and marry into Huai Manor.

Of course I was unhappy to learn of this, but I thought that a mighty prince like me could not long remain on the receiving end of such disdain. Once she was married to me, she would see how handsome and refined I was, and learn the truth of my loyalty and magnanimity. Perhaps then she would change her mind and be happy to spend her life with me.

On our wedding night, I lifted her veil and indeed saw a face of peerless beauty. Her eyelids were lowered. In the candlelight, she looked immensely dignified and refined, but there was no hint of expression on her face. It was as indifferent as a bowl of cold water.

I thought she was shy. I took her hand and spoke to her. I said, *Starting now, you and I are husband and wife. You are Princess Huai, Jing Weiyi's lady. You don't have to address me as Your Highness. You may call me by my given name, Weiyi, or my courtesy name, Chengjun, or you can call me Yi-lang or Jun-lang if you like.*

I hoped that "Jun-lang," so similar to a word for a charming young man, would make her smile, but her face remained like a bowl of cold water, and the icy hand I held trembled slightly.

I bent my head to kiss her lips. She closed her eyes as if submitting to her martyrdom. Tears slowly seeped from the corners of her eyes.

I paused midway and did not kiss her in the end, instead sighing and asking her, "Does it pain you so to be touched by me?"

She said nothing. Tears formed tracks from her eyes down her cheeks.

I felt very gloomy. I do not enjoy taking advantage of others, and I did not lack for bedfellows. Why force myself on a respectable woman?

So I said reasonably, "Since you do not want me to touch you, I won't. We can have marital relations when you think it's acceptable."

Then I went to my study and spent my wedding night alone.

From then on, I still went on treating her as my princess. She did not lack for anything that was rightfully hers. I gave her whatever she wanted.

Occasionally I asked her, *Princess, have you changed your mind?*

For the first couple of years, she continued to show me that same face like cold water. In the third and fourth years, she deigned to turn her head away from me with a snort. In the fifth and sixth, she finally managed to glance at me, then bite her lip and look away. Just when I thought I was making progress and that maybe one day she would be willing, she pulled today's stunt on me.

I really couldn't understand what the princess was about.

Nor did I understand how she could now lay all the blame on me and say that I had deserted her. Not only had she accused me of being a cutsleeve, she had even said I was impotent.

Could this really be my fault?

Temporarily eschewing the cutsleeve question, I couldn't live like a monk just because she wouldn't have me. Then there really would have been something wrong with me.

Just then, the zongzi by the door spoke up. "Your Highness, I have done no such thing with the princess!"

The hall once again fell silent.

Yun Yu's snow-bright eyes looked from him to me.

The zongzi's clear eyes were candid. "It is through His Highness's favor that I have found shelter in this household. I would never do such a perverse and unnatural thing, even if I were to die the cruelest death." He closed his eyes. "Your Highnesses may kill me or punish me, but I cannot permit Her Highness to slander my integrity like this, nor to disgrace His Highness's reputation!"

His voice was neither particularly loud nor especially passionate, but for some reason, in the silent hall, there was something uniquely compelling about it.

The princess gave another savage laugh, cutting him off. "Integrity? Haha, a person like you speaks of integrity? Laughable, truly laughable! Why don't I tell everyone what His Highness brought you here for?"

Her words were filled with venomous rancor. At last I had no choice but to speak. "Princess, I engaged He Zhong as an accountant out of appreciation for his talents. You ought to know that."

"Your Highness, why go on pretending?" the princess said. "Has there ever been anything pure between you and the young men you bring home?"

Heh. The seated Yun Yu laughed again.

He Zhong flushed. "I…"

At this point, I had no choice but to say angrily, "Princess, how long will these irresponsible remarks continue? When have I ever brought home those I've had impure relations with?"

Yun Yu gave a cough, then broke into hearty laughter. An array of colors bloomed across Censor He's face. He seemed to have gone numb.

Seeing that the situation was now completely out of hand, I sighed lengthily. "Fine, Princess, you've made your stink and let everyone know everything there is to know. Let us end this here for now." I summoned the guards to lock the princess and He Zhong in separate retiring rooms for now.

As she was dragged away, the princess went on struggling and shouting abuse. When she was gone, her voice still lingered among the rafters.

Yun Yu twisted the lid of his teacup. "What marvelous luck. I never thought when I brought Censor He for a visit that I would get to see such a rare sight."

Censor He was silent, shivering.

"There's no need to fear," Yun Yu said to him, smiling. "You and I have witnessed a forbidden scene. Call it an eye-opener. Even if His Highness wanted to silence everyone present today, there are so many people. I'm in it with you, right?"

All this talk of silencing. Who could silence everyone?

Before half the day was out, my reputation as an unsurpassed cuckold would probably be known to everyone in the capital.

Yun Yu sipped his tea, then clicked his tongue. "That little scholar He Zhong is quite dainty, from what I could see. Your Highness's tastes have been getting more and more vegetarian."

There was a bitter taste in my mouth. Suddenly, I was in no mood to explain.

Who would believe me if I did? Where my reputation is concerned, no one has ever believed my explanations.

Despite being a cutsleeve, I have only ever indulged at pleasure houses; I have never encroached upon men of respectable background. The scholar He Zhong had

two months ago been a public letter writer who had fainted in the street from hunger. I took him in out of kindness and arranged work for him doing accounts. I merely thought it a convenient way to do a good deed and had been on the point of forgetting about him altogether. Who could have thought that such an idea would enter the princess's head?

His current troubles were my doing.

And I truly did not believe that he could have become the princess's lover, much less a father.

Yun Yu put down his teacup, rose, and said, "Your Highness, if you aren't planning to silence me and Censor He, we will take our leave of you."

"I've given you two something to laugh about today," I said with a bitter smile. "I won't see you off."

Yun Yu joined his hands in a salute and exited sedately with Censor He. I sat in my chair, feeling a sudden desire for someone to come along with a club and knock me unconscious.

The servants surreptitiously cast pitying and speculative glances at me. It was Zhang Xiao, the oldest domestic steward in the manor, who cautiously said, "Your Highness, regarding the princess…"

I pressed my fingers to my forehead. "For now, don't let anything get out. Get a doctor to examine Her Highness."

An examination showed that the princess was indeed pregnant, and nearly two months along.

Whoever's child it was, it certainly couldn't be mine. And two months just happened to be how long He Zhong had been at the manor.

News traveled even faster than I anticipated. That afternoon, a palace eunuch delivered a verbal decree from the emperor summoning me to the palace.

The imperial gardens were dense with green shade and blooming with bright flowers. I stepped onto a zigzagging covered walkway above the imperial pond, which was home to colorful carp. These were accustomed to being fed, so when they caught a hint of anyone's approach, they clustered together in a complacent riot of red to pursue the figure above the pond.

At the end of the walkway, past two shrubs and an unusually shaped stone, inside a palace hall whose door stood half ajar, a bright yellow figure held a book and wielded a brush. A eunuch announced me. At this I stepped inside and knelt respectfully before the desk. The bright yellow sleeves shifted; the wearer set down

the brush and book in his hands. "You're here, Imperial Uncle. Stand up. There's no need for so much ceremony."

The emperor rarely called me "Imperial Uncle" these days. Normally he called me Prince Huai, or used my courtesy name, Chengjun. Each time I was once again addressed as Imperial Uncle, my heart leapt into my throat—because it was certain nothing good would follow.

Sure enough, once I had risen, I saw my nephew the emperor, with his brow faintly furrowed, concern on his august countenance. "We hear you have had a family tragedy at home, Imperial Uncle?"

"It does not amount to a tragedy," I responded, "only a trifle unworthy of mention."

Qizhe's brow relaxed. Half-seated on his throne, he said, "What punishment are you planning, Imperial Uncle?"

The marriage between me and my princess had been arranged by the empress dowager and officiated by the emperor. If I wanted to punish her, I rightly ought to notify the two of them.

So I said, "This is a private scandal. I do not wish for it to become public. First, I wish to conduct a thorough investigation at home, then consider what comes next."

Qizhe picked up a memorial to the throne that lay in front of him and flipped through it. "If you don't wish for it to become public, then we will tell the Court of the Imperial Clan not to involve themselves for now. We hear that the princess has already confessed everything. Are you planning to investigate anew, Imperial Uncle?"

"Though I have the princess's statement," I said, "it is still better to look into the facts. I cannot condemn an innocent man based on a one-sided account."

Qizhe shut the memorial. "The one-sided account you refer to is presumably the princess's testimony. As for the innocent man, who is he?"

"Everything about the princess and He Zhong that concerns this matter… ought to be carefully investigated. There must be no wrongful accusation. That is my opinion."

Gripping the memorial, Qizhe said, "Oh, so the other party is named He Zhong." The corners of his lips rose in a half-smile. "You will have to be more careful next time you bring someone home, Imperial Uncle."

Alas, no explanation was possible, so I offered none.

I bowed. "I hear Your Majesty's order and shall abide by it. I will be more cautious in the future."

Qizhe dropped the memorial back onto the desk. “Fine, since you want to investigate this matter thoroughly, then you may return home.”

I knelt respectfully to bid him farewell, then withdrew.

On the covered walkway, Yun Yu was coming my way with another person. We met in the middle.

“So His Majesty already knows,” said Yun Yu, smiling. “Your Highness Prince Huai, I must plead my innocence. It was not I who spoke of it. But let me be indiscreet for a moment. Your Highness ought to amend that romantic temperament of yours. Granted, women are unreliable, but from this instance, it can be seen that men are not very reliable either.” Smiling brightly, he glanced at the person beside him. “Chancellor Liu, don’t you agree?”

I looked at the person next to Yun Yu. With a bitter laugh, I said, “Don’t pour salt on my wounds, Supervisor Yun. Chancellor Liu is an honorable man. Naturally he cannot speak on a subject like this. Why drag him into it?”

Though Yun Yu was abrasive, he always knew when to stop. He let the matter rest. After exchanging a few casual remarks, we bade each other farewell and parted.

The person beside him bowed slightly to me. “Your Highness Prince Huai, I will take my leave.”

I nodded in return. “Go ahead, Chancellor Liu.”

As I watched his dark blue figure move gradually toward the other end of the walkway with Yun Yu, many feelings mingled in my heart. Yet I could never resist taking another look at him as he departed.

The whole world knows that I, Prince Huai, Jing Chengjun, am a cutsleeve.

In fact, it began as a ruse; I wasn’t really a cutsleeve.

I thought at the time that it was a burden on the empress dowager and my nephew the emperor to be always worrying about me. Even if I produced an heir, in the best-case scenario, his circumstances would be the same as mine now.

I might as well simply let the family line end with my generation. So I pretended to prefer men to calm the minds of the empress dowager and the emperor.

Lie enough, and even you may come to believe it. Though I have no understanding how it happened, after too much time spent pretending to be a cutsleeve, I became one.

By the time I discovered that my ruse had become reality, there was no turning back.

At some point, a person had entered my heart, and there was no ridding myself of him.

Stand too long in the dark, and you begin to love the light. If you can only eat sweets, your mind dwells on salt.

I think that it is perhaps because of this that I first fell in love with him.

I was the court's greatest malignant tumor, and he, its most loyal minister since Li Yue, another spotless pillar in the raging current of filth.

At court and among the common people alike, everyone spoke of him as a sagacious chancellor. When we met, I had to let him call me "Your Highness Prince Huai," while I called him only "Chancellor Liu."

Yet his given name, his courtesy name, had been spoken hundreds upon thousands of times in my heart.

When would the day come when I would be lost in conversation with him? When would I be able to speak his given name, his courtesy name?

Tongyi, Liu Tongyi.

Ransi.

Chapter Two

In the dusky light of the setting sun, I left by the eastern gate of the imperial gardens. I hadn't gone two steps when I heard someone repeatedly calling, "Imperial Uncle, Imperial Uncle…"

I stopped, looked back, and saw one of my imperial nephews, Qitan, Prince Dai, hurrying toward me. He came up to me and stopped in his tracks. Smiling, he said, "Imperial Uncle, I'm so glad to see you at the palace. There's an extremely urgent matter I need your help with."

Ordinarily, I would have given Qitan a hard time and made him call me "Imperial Uncle" some more before asking what he wanted, but I was really in no mood for that today, so I said bluntly, "What do you need money for now?"

Qitan grinned and rubbed his hands together. "You've always been so good to me, Imperial Uncle. I didn't even have to say anything for you to know what I wanted." He came closer to me and flashed a number with his fingers. "Six thousand liang."

I sighed. "Qitan, why don't you just pick up a torch, burn down my manor, and be done with it?"

Lately Prince Dai had become obsessed with antiques and artworks. He had collected countless items, and lost a fortune in the process. Yet in fact he was only an amateur when it came to antiques. Only an amateur would have the zeal and courage to dare to spend on such a scale.

He had used up most of his own spending money, so he came to me, unabashedly borrowing again and again because I had doted on him since he was a child. Each time he asked for more, and of course I had no hope that he would ever pay me back.

Rubbing his hands together, Prince Dai said, "Imperial Uncle, it really is six thousand liang, just these six thousand. Do you know what I ran across today, Imperial Uncle? A wine cup used by King Wen of Zhou! The seller is only asking for eight thousand liang of silver, and there are lots of people fighting me for it. If I'm too late, it might get snatched up by someone else."

"I recall that just a few days ago you got hold of an earpick used by King Zhou of Shang, which seems to have been a fake. As I see it, you have no luck with the Shang and Zhou dynasties.[4] Just let it go."

I turned and kept walking. Qitan came after me, dogging my steps. "Imperial Uncle, my good Imperial Uncle, Uncle Jun, this time it's different. Don't you think I learned my lesson the first time? This time it's absolutely, positively genuine! Besides, it's going to be my imperial brother's birthday in a few days. I want to present the wine cup to him as a birthday gift. Think of it as helping grant my wish! When I offer it, how about I explain on the gift list that this wine cup is a joint present from you and me. You'll have a share in it too, Imperial Uncle. Won't that do?"

Ridiculous. If I put up six thousand liang of silver for something that costs eight thousand, when you're writing out the gift list, reasonably speaking, your name ought to be written far behind mine.

"If you can mend this bad habit of yours," I said earnestly to Qitan, "and cease picking up all these antiques and artworks, His Majesty will no doubt be immeasurably gratified. In fact, His Majesty would be happier than he would be to receive ten great cauldrons once used by King Wen of Zhou to worship the heavens."

But Qitan refused to see sense. He ignored what I'd said and caught hold of my sleeve. "My dear Imperial Uncle, I'm begging you. What about five thousand liang? Can you do five thousand?"

I sighed again. "I'll turn around right now and present a memorial to His Majesty asking him to make Henan your fiefdom. I've heard that there are many tombs of the Shang-Zhou period there. I'll get you a couple dozen able-bodied men, a cartful of pickaxes and shovels, and you can dig there every day. You're sure to uncover some treasures. You'll be better off than you are now."

Qitan was busy keeping a tight hold of my sleeve. Grinning broadly, he said, "Little Imperial Uncle, four thousand liang, what about four thousand liang?"

Made a cuckold in the morning, then taken for a cash cow in the afternoon. I was very dispirited by my situation. As if he had smeared his mouth with honey, Qitan said, "I know you'll lend it to me, Imperial Uncle Jun, you've always loved me the most, ever since I was little."

I continued to sigh. I really was helpless here. Qitan's daring did have something to do with the way I had spoiled him all his life.

When the various princes and princes' sons of that set—Qitan, Qifei, Qili and so on, Qizhe included—had been little, I had played with them all.

Among them, the late emperor's sons, Qitan and Qifei, and the princes' sons, Qili, Qizheng, Qiqian, and others, had particularly loved coming to Huai Manor. Qitan was clever, bold, and sweet-tongued. At that age, the only difference between Qitan and the emperor was their mothers, but they didn't seem like brothers at all. As a child, Qizhe had been taciturn, keeping everything bottled up. He never revealed when he wanted something, or even when he didn't. When Qitan had any opinion whatsoever, he was sure to shout it as loudly as possible. Anything he wanted, he had to have. Due to this power of his, he had carried off quite a lot of items from Huai Manor. It was also because of this that it appeared as if I had always doted on Qitan.

Reportedly, the empress dowager had once been worried that I would shift my support to Qitan, posing a danger to Qizhe's throne. When I later learned of this, I thought it was a little ridiculous.

Never mind that I don't have the power to depose or appoint an heir; merely considering Qitan's temperament, it was for the best that he never became emperor. If he were the one on the throne now, our national treasury might well have been emptied, and the empire wouldn't be far from ruin.

Qitan was still clutching my sleeve and looking at me with a bright smile. If I didn't agree to give him the money, I probably had no hope of him letting go of my sleeve any time today.

Helpless, I prepared to nod. When I thought of striking off another large sum in my ledger, I felt a faint stabbing pain in my heart.

Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a dark blue figure appearing around a corner. Out of nowhere, my heart fluttered.

Perhaps heaven was taking mercy on me, handing me an opportunity like this?

I pretended I hadn't seen. To Qitan, I said, "Fine. But I really can't stop worrying about whether that wine cup is real or a fake. If it's a fake and I give you the silver, wouldn't I be overindulging you? I think I'd better go with you. There will be time to talk things over once it's been appraised and confirmed to be genuine."

"Little Imperial Uncle," said Qitan, "I don't think you know any more about antiques than I do. I figure that if something looks real to me, it's sure to look real to you too. Why should you go to the trouble of coming with me?"

I shook my head. "No, no, I won't rest easy until it's been appraised." I had spoken slowly, drawing out my words. That dark blue figure was now approaching.

I raised my head. Pretending I had just noticed him, I said, "What a coincidence. We were just talking about our inability to appraise antiques, and along comes an expert."

Smiling, Liu Tongyi bowed to me and Qitan and said, "I seem to have disturbed a conversation between Your Highnesses."

Qitan finally let go of my sleeve and nodded in return. "Are you on your way home, Chancellor Liu?"

"Precisely," Liu Tongyi said politely, then made to take his leave of us.

I gathered up my courage and said, "Chancellor Liu, please stay."

Liu Tongyi stopped. A shade of doubt appeared in his expression. Qitan looked at me in astonishment.

I had very few dealings with Liu Tongyi at court. At most we exchanged a bit of small talk when we met. Everyone knew that there was neither friendship nor enmity between us, but I was a treacherous prince, while he was a sagacious chancellor—one black and one white. To outsiders, it was a matter of course that we would be at odds.

So when I asked Liu Tongyi to stay, not only was his expression doubtful, even my imperial nephew Prince Dai was astonished.

Trying to act natural, I said, "I would like to trouble Chancellor Liu for some assistance." Qitan stared at me in open shock. I smiled and said to him, "Chancellor Liu is among the top talents at court. He is known to be a master of antiques appraisal. It seems the heavens have sent us an expert."

Qitan appeared conflicted. "Imperial Uncle, what are you…"

I saluted Liu Tongyi. "Chancellor Liu, my imperial nephew Prince Dai wants to spend a large sum to purchase a wine cup that he claims was used by King Wen of Zhou. I worry that he may be chasing a fake. If you are currently at leisure, may we invite you to come with us to have a look? That way we won't end up out some thousands of liang of silver to buy a fake antique and give others cause to laugh their heads off."

I looked at Liu Tongyi. I could count on my fingers how many opportunities I'd found during the years we had been at court together to exchange a direct look with him like this, so in the spring breeze, my heart was quite full.

Liu Tongyi was always cautious and self-disciplined. He wouldn't want to be tainted by my foulness. Most likely, he would find some excuse to shirk the invitation and leave.

In the light of sunset, his face was as simple and elegant as an ink wash painting, and my heart seemed inclined to imitate his air. The princess, the scandal, the cuckoldry—all retreated from me for the moment, disappearing beyond the clouds.

He smiled faintly and said to me, "Naturally I would not refuse the honor of Your Highness Prince Huai's invitation. I am at Your Highness's service."

In that moment, flowers bloomed in the spring breeze. My heart overflowed.

Liu Tongyi was dressed in his official robe and had to go home to change. Qitan and I had both come to court in our ordinary clothes.

At the palace gate, I said to Qitan, "If you're in a hurry and worried that someone will get there ahead of you, you can go ahead and find a spot. I will accompany Chancellor Liu while he goes home to change. Don't buy it before Chancellor Liu and I get there."

Qitan's face filled with gratitude. "All right, Imperial Uncle. Then I'll take my leave of you. Remember to bring the silver banknotes!" He leapt up onto his horse and galloped away like the wind.

I smiled at Liu Tongyi. "My imperial nephew is too impatient. He rushes into everything recklessly."

"His Highness Prince Dai is swift and decisive," said Liu Tongyi. "When he reaches Your Highness's age, most likely he will also be as cautious in thought and deed as Your Highness."

Was this praise or disparagement? Ransi must have been under some misunderstanding concerning me, but even if his comment was meant as an insult, I was still pleased to hear it come out of his mouth.

I smiled at him again. "Chancellor Liu, you are too kind. Though I have admittedly reached a certain age, I still fall short here and there, so these imperial nephews probably all see me as a peer. I can never keep up the dignity required of an imperial uncle in front of them."

There was a ways yet to go from the palace gate to Liu Tongyi's sedan. I deliberately slowed my speech and pace both.

Fortunately, Liu Tongyi had no reserve in speaking to me. To my remark he answered, "Your Highness Prince Huai isn't much older than His Highness Prince Dai and the rest. In their eyes, Your Highness is probably different from His Highness Prince Shou and the other princes."

Of my older cousins, like Prince Shou and Prince Xiang, the eldest was over fifty. If my father were still living, he would be about the same age. I really didn't seem to

belong to the same generation as them. So I said, “These words have made me feel as fresh as a youth, Chancellor Liu.”

Liu Tongyi smiled. “Your Highness is too kind.”

I followed Liu Tongyi’s sedan in my carriage and arrived at his residence along with him. Before taking his seat in the sedan, he had asked me, “Isn’t Your Highness going home to pick up silver banknotes?”

“I don’t believe Qitan’s wine cup was really used by King Wen of Zhou,” I said. “It’s almost certainly a fake. We’ll go have a look, Chancellor Liu. There will be a chance to come back to it if your appraisal proves it to be genuine.”

Liu Tongyi nodded. “Yes, presumably a seller of antiques won’t be worried that Your Highnesses might take his wine cup without paying.”

“Of course,” I said, “especially since we have Chancellor Liu himself as a guarantor.”

Liu Tongyi’s eyebrows rose slightly. “So that is why Your Highness insisted on taking me along.”

“Oh, no,” I said with a sigh. “You’ve seen through me, Chancellor Liu.”

Liu Tongyi smiled slightly and bent to enter his sedan. I smiled as well and got into my carriage.

My vehicle stopped at Liu Tongyi’s residence, causing a considerable commotion inside. As I disembarked, I saw with my own eyes the faces of a steward and three or four pages change color. However, I soon found that Chancellor Liu ran his household ably. Those who snuck glances at me only dared to do so from discreet corners. While I received inquisitive looks from the maids and pages who came to serve tea as I sat in the main hall, their expressions were still respectful.

Liu Tongyi was unmarried, but his house was still very tastefully furnished, and not a bit worse than my house, which had the benefit of a wife.

As my thoughts turned to wives, I remembered the princess, and my head began to ache faintly again.

Fortunately, at that moment, Liu Tongyi arrived, having changed into casual clothes. He wore a jade-green silk robe and, having omitted a crown, had tied his hair with a ribbon of the same color. This made him look less stiff and more graceful. I could once again forget the princess for a time.

He stood in the hall and said to me, “Your Highness, shall we go now?”

I cheered up. “Yes, let’s go.”

Qitan's wine-cup seller was aboard a large pleasure boat on the river in the capital's suburbs. When Liu Tongyi and I arrived, the twilight was profound. The lanterns on the pleasure boat had been lit.

Qitan was seated in the reception hall in the pleasure boat's hold, holding a wine cup as he watched girls in the costume of the western regions dance.

Apart from him, several others occupied the reception hall, some quite familiar to me and mostly sons of the capital's aristocracy. Qitan, with a slightly mysterious air, as if he were here in disguise, stood up and ran over. Tugging on my sleeve, he said quietly, "You're finally here, Imperial Uncle. Oh, and Chancellor Liu is here too. Imperial Uncle, no one here knows who we are. You mustn't reveal our identities."

I made a sound of agreement, thinking to myself, *You're always parading around the capital. How many people are there who wouldn't recognize your face? They're probably just pretending they don't know you*!

Qitan led Liu Tongyi and me to our seats. Sure enough, while the others present appeared unmoved, their gazes constantly wandered our way. Prince Huai, Chancellor Liu, and Prince Dai, all three together on a pleasure boat. Beyond a doubt, the whole court would know of this marvel tomorrow.

"Where is the wine cup you want to buy?" I asked Qitan. "I suppose it can't be the one you're holding now."

"How could it be this one?" Qitan said, smiling. "I was waiting for you, Imp… Uncle, and Young Master Tong, before I asked Master Xu to bring it out."

Then he said to a person sitting beside him, "Master Xu, the people I was waiting for are here. You can bring it out."

This Master Xu was in his forties or fifties, with a mauve face, a little pudgy, and dressed in shabby clothes. He had an unexpectedly honest look. After making a sound of agreement, he bowed in our direction, then turned and went through a side door. Shortly, he came out carrying a wooden box.

Master Xu placed this box on the tea table in front of us, then slowly and carefully lifted the lid. Inside was another little box. When he opened that, there was another, and then still another. Only when the fifth box was opened did it reveal a bundle of deep red satin.

This thing had been packaged with plenty of pomp.

Master Xu lifted the parcel wrapped in red satin and held it up in front of Qitan as if it were a fragile egg yolk. My nephew rubbed his hands together and accepted the parcel. Layer by layer, he unwrapped it.

Nestled amid the red satin was a wine cup covered in verdigris that testified to its age.

Judging from the patination, this cup might actually have been used by King Wen of Zhou.

As if afraid that his fingerprints would dirty it, Qitan lifted it through the cloth and turned it this way and that to look at it. Then I took it from him and looked at it as well. Next to me, Qitan pointed out, "Uncle, look at the exterior of this wine cup! Look at the designs! There's no doubt that it's a relic of the Shang-Zhou period! And get a look at the verdigris. A thick patina like this must have taken a thousand years to build up."

His eyes sparkled. He seemed to want to reach straight through my robe to get right to my silver banknotes.

I silently offered the wine cup to Liu Tongyi, who took it, looked, then said, "Master Xu, as I see it, this wine cup does not appear to be a relic of the Shang-Zhou period."

I had been expecting this. I smiled.

Master Xu looked shocked. "Sir, please mind what you say. I have always been an honest businessman. How could I dare to deceive my valued customers with a fake?"

Qitan looked even more shocked. "Chancl… Young Master Tong, look closely. It's clear at a glance that this is an antique with a long history behind it. If it doesn't come from the Shang-Zhou period, then what year does it come from?"

Liu Tongyi put the wine cup on the table and said lightly, "As I see it, it's from last year."

When night was at its deepest, I returned to my manor by starlight.

Qitan was despondent. The wine cup had been determined by Liu Tongyi to be a fake, and a very clumsy one at that. Liu Tongyi said that making a fake like this was very easy. Cast a mold based on the antique to be copied, prepare a pot of liquid copper, and pour as many as you like. Then you toss it in grease and let it soak, bury it in sludge for several days, and expose it to the sun for several more. Repeat the sequence several times. Finally, after it has been buried in earth and soaked in water, in about seven or eight months, it will be covered in verdigris and look ancient and weathered.

Everyone at court knew that, apart from the three great tumors, the court also was home to two great assets. The first was Chancellor Liu's eyes, and the second was Supervisor Yun's mouth.

When Chancellor Liu's eyes passed this judgment, Qitan was exceptionally upset. One of the other guests immediately called the authorities to take Master Xu to the government bureau and confiscate his goods while they were at it.

Liu Tongyi looked on with interest. Master Xu had several large crates of goods, and apart from the boxes, which were real wood, everything else was an imitation.

The fake goods were strewn all over the boat by the constables and bailiffs from the government offices. Gold and silver, copper and iron, jade and glass—all of it looked beautiful as it glimmered in the lamplight. Sadly, there was nothing beautiful about the look on my nephew Qitan's face.

As I see it, young men must experience some turmoil; they must take some losses in order to mature.

Liu Tongyi stood apart, as if the scene had nothing to do with him. He casually picked up an item and toyed with it.

I strolled over to have a look. It proved to be a mellow little piece of jade with cloud-like crimson swirls against a background of white. It was a lovely stone, sparkling and translucent. I gathered that this was material Master Xu had been keeping to make another fake. There was red in it already; if it was dyed, it could be turned into a bloodstone and carved with a counterfeit seal from the previous dynasty.

Following his inspection, Liu Tongyi put it back. The bailiffs were sure to want to take all these fakes back to the government bureau to serve as evidence.

Qitan had been deeply wounded by the wine cup. After leaving the pleasure boat, he said he had something else to do. Probably going drinking somewhere.

In order not to draw too much attention when we arrived, Liu Tongyi and I had shared a carriage from his residence, which now first took me back to my manor. In front of my gate, I got out and thanked Liu Tongyi. "I really have taken you out of your way today, Chancellor Liu."

Liu Tongyi also got out and stood smiling next to the carriage. "Your Highness is too kind." In the night breeze, the creases in his jade robe stirred like the rippling waters of a lake.

I took something from my sleeve and presented it to him. "I hope you will accept this small token, Chancellor Liu."

Liu Tongyi was a little surprised when he saw it.

"What I'm doing is called 'offering stolen flowers to the Buddha,'" I said. "I hope you will be merciful and not report me to the Court of Judicial Review. I think that it makes no great difference whether this little stone is included among the fake

goods."

Liu Tongyi's eyes curved slightly. "Your Highness isn't only asking me to play deaf and dumb, but also to accept stolen goods."

"You won't accept it?" I asked morosely.

The curve of Liu Tongyi's eyes deepened. He took the little stone from my hand and lifted his sleeves. "Thank you, Your Highness. I bid you farewell."

I watched him step into his carriage, which then receded into the darkness. Tonight had been worth practically as much to me as the past ten years of my life.

It seemed that Liu Tongyi's usual rigid and fastidious manner wasn't entirely his true self.

I had not misjudged him.

After all, if he really were a dried-up scholar, how could he have become imperial chancellor at such a young age?

I walked inside, afloat upon a charming night breeze. Once through the gate, I immediately sensed something amiss.

A person standing by the side gate stamped his feet and said, "Oh, Your Highness Prince Huai, you're back at last!"

When I saw him, I froze.

Surely not. This late at night, how could it be…

I walked quickly toward the main hall. The state of affairs I observed along the way proved that it really could.

I straightened my clothing and stepped into the main hall. I was just about to kneel when from the seat of honor came a familiar voice: "You're finally back, Imperial Uncle. No need to kneel. You don't have to be so proper when you see us in your own home."

I bowed. "Greetings, Your Majesty. I was unaware that Your Majesty would be gracing me with your presence and have not prepared an adequate reception. I hope Your Majesty will forgive me."

My nephew the emperor, sitting in the central seat at the head of the room, said impatiently, "Imperial Uncle, why don't you straighten out your tongue and speak to us properly."

I had no choice but to stand up straight and say with a smile, "Your Majesty, what has brought you here so late at night?"

This question at last placated the emperor. He leaned back in his seat and accepted tea from a young eunuch. "This evening, we heard that the family tragedy

at your residence had taken a turn for the worse. The princess attempted to hang herself, and the other suspect rammed his head against a wall and bit his tongue. Our mother is unwell and lacks the strength to come and inquire into such a serious matter. There had been no trace of you since you left the palace, Imperial Uncle, so we had no choice but to come in person to your residence to oversee your domestic affairs for you. Do you think we have meddled, Imperial Uncle?"

So from the time I went to the palace to the time I came home, the situation at the manor had devolved to such a degree.

"It is to my infinite distress that my domestic affairs have disturbed Your Majesty," I said at once. "I am moved to tears of gratitude by the solicitude Your Majesty has shown me."

Qizhe cast down his eyes and used the lid of his teacup to stir the leaves floating in the tea. "Infinitely distressed *and* moved to tears. Your labors are great, Imperial Uncle. You ought to look after your health. We have heard that this evening you and Chancellor Liu visited a pleasure boat together and listened to music on the river. One wonders whether you were content to leave it at that?"

When Liu Tongyi and I had stood together at the gate, we must have attracted considerable notice from those inside.

"Oh, yes," I said. "This afternoon, Prince Dai wished to buy an antique. I know little of such things, so I invited Chancellor Liu to come take a look."

"Yes, Qitan just came to complain to us," said Qizhe. "He says you insisted on inviting Chancellor Liu, and now he owes Liu Tongyi a favor and has lost face in front of him."

The hall was vast and half full of people. I had rushed in and only had time for a passing glance, so I hadn't had a clear look at who was here.

"Prince Dai did indeed leave a step ahead of me," I said. "He said he was going drinking, so I made do with Chancellor Liu's carriage on the way back. It did not occur to me that Prince Dai would reach my house ahead of me and bring his complaint to Your Majesty. If he comes to me again to borrow money when he has none of his own to spend, I will not lend it to him." I glanced left and right. "Where has that brat Prince Dai gone? I have a score to settle with him."

I swept the room a number of times and found nothing but guards and eunuchs. I didn't see Qitan.

Qizhe raised his eyelids slightly and put on a tiny smile. "Qitan must have known that we were at Huai Manor and worried that we would become impatient waiting

for you. That is why he deliberately hurried here to tell us. As he spoke, his account inadvertently shifted into a complaint. He might have regretted it himself after the fact and worried that you would chide him when you returned, so he left at once. It was just while you were talking to Chancellor Liu at the gate, Imperial Uncle. He left by the back gate. Don't blame him."

I responded, smiling, "With Your Majesty to intercede for him, however much I might have wished to settle accounts, I no longer wish it."

"Imperial Uncle," said Qizhe, "we do not know whether we ought to be complimenting you on your magnanimity and composure. Qitan, ignorant of the situation, heard along the way that we had come to your residence and knew that it might be a matter of urgency, so he ran over in a flurry to notify us of your whereabouts. Meanwhile, Imperial Uncle, once you had concluded your solicitous attentions to your nephew, you took your sweet time coming back in Chancellor Liu's carriage, and even stopped to have a chat."

Not only had I had a chat, I had also given a gift. I wondered what kind of precious treasure the little stone I had given Liu Tongyi had become in the telling when it was reported.

This evening I had gone a little overboard hugging myself in delight over getting a little closer to Ransi, and it happened to coincide with Qizhe's presence at the manor. This was just my luck.

My intentions might be ill, but everything I had done was open and aboveboard. I had no need to hide. I looked at Qizhe and said frankly, "Because the person I had troubled was Chancellor Liu, I needed to be more respectful. Chancellor Liu and I are hardly friends. I wanted to say a little more and get to know him better."

Qizhe looked into my eyes again and put his teacup back onto the tray held up by the young eunuch.

I quickly followed up, "I had no idea that Your Majesty was here, or else I would have come faster than a messenger bearing a military dispatch."

Qizhe raised a hand and waved. "Enough. If you say anything else, the subject will run eighteen thousand li away from us. Imperial Uncle, an imperial physician has examined the princess. She was not seriously injured and has already regained consciousness. We asked her a few questions, and she had some things to say."

From Qizhe's expression, I could tell that the princess's words and deeds had not fallen short of this morning's efforts.

"Imperial Uncle," said Qizhe, "what are you planning to do? This is our first time looking into this kind of domestic affair. It will be up to you in the end."

I said hesitantly, "As it has already disturbed Your Majesty… reasonably speaking, it ought to be handled by the Court of the Imperial Clan. But… I still wish…"

Qizhe raised his eyebrows. "You still wish to resolve it at home?"

I sighed. "Once this storm has passed… my reputation… hardly anything will remain of it. If this goes to the Court of the Imperial Clan, most likely nothing will remain."

Qizhe leaned against the yellow satin cushion embroidered with a dragon that a eunuch had placed on his chair. "How are you planning to punish the princess and He Zhong, Imperial Uncle?"

"The princess is indeed pregnant," I said, "but apart from her own account, there is no evidence that clearly demonstrates a connection to the accountant He Zhong. I think I ought to investigate. Furthermore, I believe that while the mother has done wrong, the child is innocent…"

"Fine, that is just," said Qizhe. "It is impossible to determine now who the child in the princess's womb belongs to. Why not settle the princess in a quiet place and make a decision after she has had the child and it can be determined whether it is of your blood, Imperial Uncle?"

My forehead throbbed, and a heaviness settled into my spine. I had no choice but to say, "There is no need to investigate this matter. I am certain that… the child in the princess's womb is indeed not mine…"

The already quiet hall seemed to grow even more hushed when I said this.

Qizhe's expression was a little hard to fathom. Shortly, he said, "You are already certain then, Imperial Uncle. Out of deference to your many years of marriage, if you plead for mercy on the princess's behalf, we will forgive her. But what we do not understand is He Zhong. He is only a scholar taken into your residence. Why would the princess say it was him if this were not the truth? And why are you so determined to keep investigating rather than believe the princess?" He looked me up and down again. "Why not imprison He Zhong in the Court of the Imperial Clan's prison?"

I sighed again. "It is my belief that there is much to suspect in the princess's account. I do not wish to tie this matter up carelessly. If her lover is indeed someone else, I cannot bear the thought that he will go wholly unpunished!"

The corners of Qizhe's lips twitched. "You cannot bear it. You make a good point, Imperial Uncle." The two beams of his sharp gaze all but cut through my face.

Shortly after, Qizhe rose without warning. "Imperial Uncle, come with us to your rear retiring room. The rest of you need not follow. We wish to say a few words in

private to Prince Huai."

This rear retiring room was a small room behind the main hall and separated by a side chamber. It was a place to withdraw to and rest on occasions when one grew weary while waiting to receive guests. I liked to go there myself.

Once over the threshold, Qizhe looked around and said, "The furnishings in this room have never changed."

I stood in the place of lower precedence and smiled obsequiously. "That is on account of my laziness."

Qizhe turned his head and gave me a glance. "It's just you and me here. There's no need for so much ceremony. Close the door."

I immediately obeyed.

Qizhe put his hands behind his back and regarded me. "That He Zhong. We saw him as well. He appears gentle and delicate. It's no wonder you feel tenderness toward him, Imperial Uncle."

All the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

"Your Majesty," I said quickly, "He Zhong truly isn't…"

"Enough, there's no need for concealment," said Qizhe. "How could we be unaware of your predilection?"

I earnestly defended myself. "Although I do have… a certain fondness… I have nonetheless always been cautious. I would never bring anyone home. I truly did happen to find him downtrodden and pitiful, yet with talent and lofty aspirations, so I gave him a position in my residence so he could keep body and soul together out of a desire to do a good deed. I am not protecting him. It is only that I have reason to suspect the princess has also misunderstood his position, and that is why…"

Qizhe frowned slightly. "In Huai Manor, if the princess were truly displeased by his presence, she could punish him however she wanted. Why would she need to get knocked up to frame him?"

Once again I sighed helplessly. "My guess is that the princess wanted not only to punish him, but to punish me as well. Your Majesty, the thoughts and actions of women are not always subject to common sense."

Qizhe's eyes narrowed and he laughed. "Yes, and you are always most sensible, Imperial Uncle. Qili was right. As soon as you open your mouth, all justice is on your side."

I bowed my head and said, "I would not dare to presume. I have only ever told the truth."

Qizhe took two steps, then retraced them and stopped in front of me. "Told the truth? Chengjun, I have never known which of your statements is true and which is false. For example, you say you prefer men, but when our mother arranged your marriage with the princess and we officiated, you still married her. You have always been romantic, and we have heard that you have a man here, another man there. I've heard many names—all these Scholar Zhangs and Master Lis. Even Yun Yu seems to be included among their ranks."

Hearing the final name, I immediately raised my head and said, "That's not…"

Qizhe cut me off. "But it seems that no one has ever entered your heart, Imperial Uncle. Even Yun Yu won't satisfy you. You have your eye on Liu Tongyi now?"

A chill ran up my back. I simply made my voice flat and expressionless and slowly said, "Your Majesty, though I do have such hobbies, I have only indulged them in pleasure houses. I am not in the habit of having stray thoughts about everyone I come across which might taint those relationships. Supervisor Yun and Chancellor Liu are Your Majesty's loyal subjects, pillars of the court. How can they be polluted by me, or by such matters? My own reputation is well-known already, and I have nothing more to fear from slander. But if it should damage the honor of loyal subjects, then even if I were to be dismembered, I could not atone for my crime."

For a time, the room was silent. When Qizhe spoke again, his tone had softened. "We were only bringing up some rumors as a joke. There's no need to disparage yourself like this or to speak so seriously. You are a pillar of the court, the person we most rely on. If you make yourself out to be worthless, what are we to do?"

"I have always muddled along carelessly," I said, "making no contributions to Your Majesty or the state. It is Your Majesty who has favored me."

After another silence, Qizhe said, "Chengjun, we have been meaning to ask you a question. What is in your heart, after all?"

"Nothing but loyalty to Your Majesty and the state," I said emphatically.

Qizhe looked at me and looked at me again. The corners of his lips twitched slightly as he said, "That is why we say that we never know which of your statements we ought to believe. You just said that you muddle along carelessly, making no contributions to us or the state, yet now you insist that you have nothing but loyalty to us and the state."

I smiled. "I may be muddled and shiftless yet still loyal. Loyalty does not necessarily come with ability."

Qizhe swept his sleeve and said, "Fine, very sensible. Now, we will leave the matter of the princess where it is, Imperial Uncle, and you can deliberate on her punishment yourself. The same applies to He Zhong. You may take care of your own domestic affairs."

I opened the door and waited until Qizhe had gone out to follow him. My nerves were strained. I felt weary.

At three you can see what a man will be in his prime, at seven you can see what he'll be in old age—this common saying isn't accurate at all.

Thinking back to when Qizhe was little, how quiet and obedient he was, who could have imagined how compelling he would be today?

No one can guess how a person will change in the future, until he changes.

The emperor at last made his way back to the palace. I respectfully saw him to the gate. When I went back inside, the ground felt unsteady beneath my feet.

I stood outside the door of the room where the princess was being held. I wanted to go in, but I was afraid that the floodgates would open wider if she saw me. So I walked away and circled around to the little room off the rear courtyard where He Zhong was being held. When I came up to the corridor, it occurred to me that many of the maids had come with the princess as part of her dowry and were quite loyal to her. Tomorrow one of them might well go and say to the princess, *Last night His Highness did not go see you but went to He Zhong's room.* The situation might become even more hopeless.

So I went back. Suddenly, I thought, *What if I just don't see either of them*?

But in all likelihood, He Zhong had been falsely accused by the princess. I'd heard he had been working quite industriously since coming to the manor despite earning hardly any money. Now, what with ramming his head against a wall and biting his tongue, he was in an awful state. It would be inhumane not to see him.

If I was going to see He Zhong, I first had to see the princess.

I went to the princess's door. This time I thought about what would happen if a maid went to the princess tomorrow and said, *After seeing you yesterday, His Highness immediately went to see He Zhong.* This decision also seemed somewhat dangerous.

I wavered indecisively by the princess's door. Next to me, Chief Steward Cao said, "Your Highness has been thinking of the princess, I can tell. To think matters between Your Highness and the princess have reached such a stage…" He wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"Yes," I said. "It's said that marriages are the outcome of fortune accumulated in a previous lifetime, but it seems that in our last lifetimes, the princess and I gathered little."

I raised a hand and said to Chief Steward Cao, "Open the door."

I stepped into the room. The princess was lying on the bed with her face turned to the wall. Four maids were in attendance by the bed to keep her from attempting suicide again.

The maids bowed to me, then discreetly withdrew. Chief Steward Cao also very considerately closed the door behind me.

When I looked at the princess, I only wanted to sigh. I didn't know what I could say. But I couldn't say nothing. I deliberated for an age, then said, "I suppose you vented your anger today."

The princess scoffed and sat up in bed. "Your Highness won't ask whose child it is?"

I was silent, so the princess continued with a sneer, "Your Highness is always putting on all kinds of airs, but now that it comes down to it, it turns out you're a spineless cuckold! I won't tell you who the child's father is even on pain of death!"

"Saying this amounts to telling me that your accusation against He Zhong is false," I said.

The princess looked alarmed. Then, holding her head high, she said, "There's only you and me here. We aren't in the courtroom of the Court of the Imperial Clan. I could tell you that I'm going to drag down He Zhong even if it means my life, and what difference would it make?"

"I only want to know for my own satisfaction," I said.

"And you say you haven't had impure relations with He Zhong. See how anxious you are."

"If you insist on thinking so, there's nothing I can do about it," I said. "But why did you have to do this to yourself?"

The princess turned her face away without answering.

I turned around. "His Majesty has graciously allowed me to adjudicate this matter myself. I had a part in driving you to these extremes, so I will think of a good outcome for you."

When I opened the door, I heard the princess say behind me, "Your Highness, I've actually hated you since before I married you, and I still do. I did this because I refuse to resign myself to this fate. What have I done to deserve this?!"

Before I left, I said, “So you made your fate even worse?” With the princess in this state, there really was nothing I could say to her, so I stepped out of the room.

Upon leaving, I did go to the cramped room containing He Zhong.

He was also lying in bed with a few servants in the room to keep an eye on him. Seeing me enter, they bowed and withdrew. Chief Steward Cao once again closed the door behind me.

I didn’t know whether He Zhong was conscious or not. I walked up to his bed. “I know that this has nothing to do with you, and the princess has wrongly accused you. You have been subject to an injustice. I’m very sorry.”

He Zhong’s head was wrapped in round upon round of white bandages. He shifted, and two tears flowed slowly from the corners of his eyes.

I continued: “Though I have no proof now, tomorrow I will be sure to give you justice.”

When I left the little room, Chief Steward Cao said, “Your Highness, how can the matter of the princess be investigated?”

“Lock each of the princess’s personal maids who came to the manor with her in a separate retiring room, and tell them that if they reveal the identity of the princess’s lover, I will only kill that man and not the princess. If they do not reveal him, tomorrow I will send the princess on her way.”

Steward Cao went to carry out my orders at once, not omitting to add before he left, “Your Highness is wise.”

The next day, the truth emerged. The princess’s lover was one of the manor’s guards. He had once been a guard in Li Yue’s residence. After I was married, Li Yue recommended him to me. I assumed that this man was a spy that the empress dowager wished to install in my home, so I accepted him and had him serve as an interior guard.

When I went to have this man arrested, he had already run off. After learning of her pregnancy, the princess had begged him to take her far away from the manor, but instead, he had acquired a sachet of drugs and told her to abort the pregnancy. In other words, the princess had in fact been provoked by him, but she didn’t want to lay the blame on her lover, so she decided to blame her own fate. Fate had decreed that she and her beloved be born to different stations and deprived of a happy ending. Thus her hatred settled on me, the one who had subjected her to this fate by marrying her against her will.

This reality saddened me. I had previously supposed that the princess might have changed her mind and fallen in love with me. A man like me ought to have had no trouble winning the heart of a young woman, so I assumed it was only because she was a well-bred lady that she felt uncomfortable broaching the subject. I had never taken the time to notice, so in the end, her love had turned to hate. From her teeth-gnashing loathing of me yesterday and her insistence on saddling He Zhong with the blame, it was evident that she was jealous. Without profound love, where could such acrimonious hatred come from?

Who could have guessed the truth? Apart from my even greater wonder at the princess's conduct, I couldn't help but feel downcast.

But why did she have to get He Zhong involved?

After hearing the news that the guard had run off, the princess went mad again. It was a different madness from yesterday's. She laughed, she cried, she screamed. Pointing at me, she said, "It's all your fault! I planned to break it off with him after I came here. I thought of submitting to you, but you turned out to be a cutsleeve! Why would you marry me if you're a cutsleeve?! I hate you! I'll make you wish you were dead! I'll ruin the lives of everyone you care for!"

So it still circled around to being all my fault.

At this point, I had no further interest in arguing with the princess, so I agreed with her. "Fine, it's all my fault. You committed adultery with the guard, slandered a bystander, conceived an illegitimate child, and on top of that destroyed my reputation and that of my family line—though my reputation hardly needed destroying… What punishment do you expect from me?"

The princess bit her lip and burst into tears.

I sighed. "Well, I will find you a convent. There you can abstain from meat and chant the name of the Buddha. Settle your mind and untie the knot in your heart as you wait for the child to be born in peace," I said mercifully. "Regardless of anything else, the child has done no wrong."

In that moment, I thought that even though I had become a cuckold, I was a cuckold with a halo above my head.

In the afternoon, Supervisor Yun stopped by Huai Manor. He hadn't changed out of his court dress. Sitting in a gazebo in the courtyard, he said with a bright smile, "Your Highness truly is a saintly cuckold, with much too open a heart."

I could hardly keep my countenance. "Supervisor Yun, I have been badly hurt by this abrupt family tragedy. I hope you can be understanding."

"It's nothing," said Yun Yu. "With a couple of pretty young men to console you, Your Highness's hurt will be all better by the end of the night." Then, changing the subject, he said, "Oh, yes, I heard that His Majesty paid a personal visit last night?"

"Yes," I said. "I had gone with Prince Dai and Chancellor Liu to see an antique and couldn't receive him in a timely manner. My profound distress has yet to abate. Speaking of which, I've remembered something I was planning to discuss with you, Supervisor Yun. Last night, His Majesty… asked me something, concerning… my relationship with you."

Yun Yu raised his eyebrows and said, "Oh?" He put his arms on his chair's armrests. His eyes glinted faintly, but his expression remained unchanged, and he said in the same tone as before, "What relationship did the emperor say Your Highness Prince Huai has with me?"

"His Majesty suspected… that you and I have *that kind* of relationship. Everyone is aware of this habit of mine. That His Majesty would say so indicates that someone has been taking note. Given that this is… a delicate time, why don't you avoid me for the time being, Supervisor Yun? I'm afraid of dragging down your reputation."

Yun Yu didn't answer. He looked at me, then after a moment, laughed and said, "I don't think there's anything to avoid. My reputation is that of a little treacherous courtier, who is the son of a great treacherous courtier. It is nothing short of Your Highness Prince Huai's. By my own temperament, I say I don't care how delicate the time may be. I'll keep doing as I please, unless Your Highness Prince Huai is worried about being burdened by me and wishes to avoid me. Then I will stop coming here."

I met his gaze. I could only smile and say, "Your words are always unanswerable, Supervisor Yun. How could I dare to tell you not to come? Since you don't mind, we'll go on as we have been."

For once, Yun Yu didn't add anything. He only stood and looked at some peonies outside the gazebo. Shortly, he turned his head and looked askance at me. "His Majesty wasn't wrong. There is a bit of something between Your Highness and myself."

When he said this, my teacup shook in my hands. "Supervisor Yun, I have apologized to you a thousand times, and now I apologize to you again. I was drunk then and took you for someone else. I hope you will be charitable and let it go."

Speaking of that incident, it really was a small mistake I had made during my many years of dalliances. I recall that Qili had invited guests, saying that he had something to show everyone. Qitan had paid a visit to borrow from me that day, so the invitation was delivered to Huai Manor. However, only Qitan received one. I was not invited.

I joked to Qitan that Qili must have obtained rare items that he couldn't let his imperial uncle see, then brazenly accompanied my nephew. When we reached Qili's manor, my imperial nephews were all gathered, along with Yun Yu, Wang Xuan, and the other young men who usually hung around my nephews. I said to Qili, *What nice thing are you keeping from your imperial uncle*? Qili looked at me without a word, raised his hands, and clapped.

In response a number of golden-haired, blue-eyed, scantily clad beautiful girls undulated into the room and began to twist their hips and cavort. Their dance was nothing like the style here in the midlands, making their breasts bounce as their slitted skirts flew up again and again, exposing their bare thighs. The eyes of my imperial nephews and the other young men were arrested, almost as if they were intoxicated.

I couldn't help but sigh. These children had been brought up too strictly. They had too little experience.

Qili saw my bleak look and said, "Imperial Uncle, I think you know why I didn't invite you."

Fortunately, Qifei knew the proper way of showing respect to an elder. He summoned a number of pretty serving boys to pour wine for me. Unfortunately most of them were still young. I am not particularly interested in the fifteen- and sixteen-year-old ones who haven't really developed yet. The ones who suit my tastes best are just on the point of maturity or already fully grown. Among the serving boys there was only one slightly older one who narrowly caught my interest. I took him by the hand and sat with him awhile. The swaying of the foreign dancers had made me dizzy, so I simply went to a gazebo in the garden to drink in peace, keeping only the serving boy who had taken my fancy with me. The afternoon was warm, and I was a little drowsy after a few cups of wine, so I took a brief nap in the gazebo.

While I was muddled with sleep, I heard someone calling into my ear: *Your Highness Prince Huai, Your Highness Prince Huai*. The voice sank into me and made my heart itch. I thought it was the youth who had been keeping me company, so I gathered up the sleeve beside me, pulled that person into my arms, and kissed him.

Not far away, a voice cried out, "Oh no, what a disaster! Imperial Uncle has the wrong person!"

I opened my eyes and realized what a terrible mistake I had made. The person I had pulled into my arms was Yun Yu.

As little subject to embarrassment as I am, my face still grew hot. Fortunately, Yun Yu was equal to the situation. He stood, brushed himself off, and said with a smile, "Your Highness was dazed from sleep. What beauty did you take me for?"

I got to my feet and hurriedly apologized, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Yun Yu said, still smiling, "It's nothing. I came too close."

Qili stood outside the gazebo, tapping his palm with a fan. "Next time you draw someone into your arms, Imperial Uncle, remember to open your eyes first."

With that blabbermouth Qili as witness, presumably many had learned of this event and used it as fodder for their private ridicule of me afterward. Recalling that period, even Qizhe had given me strange looks; probably he had also known, and that was why he said what he had last night.

Yun Yu said unhurriedly, "On that subject, I ought to say a word of thanks to Your Highness for the favor you showed me."

I coughed and lifted my teacup to take a drink.

Yun Yu stood, looking at the flowers, then said, "Your Highness has sent the princess to cultivate her mind in a convent. What of He Zhong?"

"He has been wrongly accused," I said, "and he must be compensated for it. I asked Qili to find something like an academy where I can send him once he has recovered. It will be advantageous to take this time to add some benevolence to my reputation."

Yun Yu turned around. "Your Highness Prince Huai acts more and more as if he already occupied that highest seat."

My hand froze. I put down my cup.

"Do not worry, Your Highness," said Yun Yu. "There is no one around."

"Supervisor Yun," I said, "some things are best left unsaid."

Yun Yu smiled. "I hear and obey. But don't you suspect there is more to the princess's behavior? In causing this scandal, it seems as if she was deliberately trying to ruin your reputation, even if she had to give up her life for it. Perhaps she received instructions from some quarter. As for He Zhong…"

"I am aware," I said. "Still, I will meet all challenges by holding steady."

Yun Yu said, "It's getting late. I will take my leave."

When he walked up to me, he stopped. In a lower voice, he told me, "The evening of the day after tomorrow, at Yuehua Pavilion. Do not fail to come due to misgivings about your reputation, Your Highness. My father and Lord Wang asked me particularly to notify you. Also, there is the matter of Liu Tongyi. Your Highness would be wise to keep your distance from him. I am sure some indispensable plan must be motivating Your Highness to approach him, but I think that he is a very difficult character and worry that Your Highness will end up in a thorny predicament."

"Yes, I am aware. I will be careful."

Yun Yu left then. I sat there, watching his figure retreat into the distance and disappear at the turn of a narrow path.

Yun Yu, Yun Yu—youthful and accomplished, with his high position and great authority, he was all but unparalleled, like a peony in full bloom. At his age, everything about him was already exceptional.

Why did he insist on plotting rebellion with his father?

Chapter Three

The next day, I went to the palace to tell the emperor and the empress dowager what arrangements I had made for the princess.

I had meant to see Qizhe first, but a young eunuch told me that His Majesty was attending to official business in the imperial study, so I turned aside and went to see the empress dowager.

When the empress dowager had heard out my arrangements for the princess, she said nothing. After a long moment, with her eyes half closed, she said, "Alas. When I arranged your marriage, I thought that, as Li Yue was an upright man, his daughter was sure to have been carefully brought up, that she would be a well-bred girl of good moral character. Wang Qin and Yun Tang both came to me at the time and also requested that their daughters be betrothed to you. I considered these three young women: Wang Qin's daughter is an upright, well-bred girl, but she isn't as attractive as Li Yue's daughter. With your looks, Prince Huai, only a beauty would suit you. Yun Tang's daughter is attractive, but I've heard that her temper isn't very good. Little Yun Yu has such a sharp tongue, yet at home even he goes in fear of his big sister. Moreover, Yun Tang is His Majesty's grand tutor and might be said to belong to your generation. If his daughter were to marry you, that would be mixing the generations. So upon consideration, I selected Li Yue's daughter. Who could ever have thought it would turn out like this? It's all my fault."

Sitting in the position of lower precedence, I smiled obsequiously. "How could it be your fault? Most of the blame for the princess's conduct lies with me."

The empress dowager opened her eyes wide. "Nonsense. How could it be *your* fault? Hadn't the princess already started her relationship with this guard before leaving her parents' home? Li Yue was a loyal minister of the court. How could he have so badly mismanaged his own household and let his daughter carry on like this?"

"Lord Li was busy with affairs of state," I said. "He can be excused for overlooking matters at home. Moreover, prior to our marriage, the princess had lived a sheltered life with her parents. To speak coarsely, what young girl doesn't long for romance? She was young and ignorant then. She had read poems about

talented scholars and fair ladies. She saw a young man, and she gave him her heart in secret. This is a common occurrence. I am certain that nothing ever really happened between them at the time. When she was married, she might have forgotten about it. But instead, after our marriage…"

I bowed my head and sighed. "It is because I deserted her… So I don't blame her too much."

The empress dowager produced a handkerchief and dabbed the corners of her eyes. "Prince Huai, it makes me sick at heart to hear you speak like this. It was your bad luck. Your heart is open, and your mind is broad. You are so considerate even in your treatment of women… So why has it come to this… What of this? I shall arrange another marriage for you. I'll be sure to choose you a good match. I have a younger cousin who, like you, is young but belongs to an older generation. She's seventeen this year and has yet to be betrothed. I've watched this child grow up. She is well-behaved and clever, only a little shy. Her zodiac animal also goes well with yours. Why don't I have a portrait brought to Huai Manor tomorrow so you can have a look?"

I sighed inwardly. Truly the empress dowager's wariness of me hadn't slackened one iota. During the years I had been married to the princess, two or three times a month, she had been brought to the palace by the empress dowager for a talk. Now that the princess had just entered a convent, she wanted to give me her cousin instead.

After a deliberate silence, I said, "If your cousin were willing to marry me, it would be the blessing of three lifetimes. But there are those unspeakable tendencies of mine, as you know… It would be nothing but a waste for any young lady to marry me."

"I think your hobby is only the slight waywardness of a romantic youth," the empress dowager persisted. "You have nothing to worry about. My cousin is dutiful and gentle. She won't get jealous. Whatever romances you may have on the outside, you need to have a woman at home to support you and help you run the household. There are some things that only a woman can do. You are an only son, Prince Huai, and you are getting on in years. You ought to be thinking of the next generation."

This little scheme of the empress dowager's really was a triumph. She would marry her cousin off to me, and her cousin would watch me day and night and bear my children, and in the future, the empress dowager's family would even have a share in my family inheritance.

"All right," I said. "As you are willing to undertake the task, I will ask it of you."

The empress dowager's greatest strength was her perseverance. If I kept sidestepping, she would keep chipping away, giving me no peace. I might as well fob her off by agreeing, then worry about it later.

As expected, once I said this, the empress dowager's expression cleared. She told me a lot more about her cousin. About another half a shichen later, I finally made my escape and withdrew.

When I came to the imperial study again, Qizhe had concluded his business and a eunuch brought me inside. Upon seeing me, the first thing Qizhe said was, "You truly are swift and decisive, Imperial Uncle. You had the whole thing settled yesterday morning."

I smiled bitterly. "There was hardly anything to settle. It just needed to be dealt with quietly with some consideration given to appearances. The empress dowager is truly attentive. Just now she wanted to arrange another marriage and betroth one of Your Majesty's cousin-aunts to me."

Qizhe's expression stilled. Then he asked, "Did you agree?"

"I evaded, saying that my bad habit couldn't be changed, and it would be a waste of the young lady's time, but the empress dowager's kindness is difficult to refuse, so I…"

Qizhe tilted his head as he looked at me. The corners of his mouth tipped up slightly. "So you have come to lodge a complaint against our mother. You want us to help you get out of it?" There was some meaning hidden in the corners of his mouth. "You must be relieved now that the princess has gone to a convent."

I remained silent.

Qizhe walked behind his desk and sat in his chair. He took a brush from the brush pot and toyed with it. "We can say something to our mother, but how are you going to thank us?"

I bowed and said, "Your Majesty is understanding. The imperial grace is vast. I am moved to tears of gratitude."

The shaft of the brush in Qizhe's hand gently touched his chin. "Just that? How stingy of you."

Hard-pressed, I said, "But it is not as though I can casually invite Your Majesty to dinner. I'm all but facing financial ruin from how much of my money Qitan has borrowed lately, and I have nothing worth offering Your Majesty."

Twirling the brush, Qizhe said, "At your house the other day, we saw a peach stone carved with the Banquet of the Eight Immortals.[5] A most fascinating object."

Goodness, my nephew the emperor had sharp eyes. That night in the front hall, he had been surrounded by eunuchs and attendants, yet he had still seen something so minuscule.

"Your Majesty's eyesight is excellent. I could not obtain such a fine object myself. It was a gift."

"Oh? You cannot part with it, Imperial Uncle?" said Qizhe. "Could it be that it was a gift from a lover?"

I'd known when I heard the words "Imperial Uncle" that this would go badly. I quickly said, "How could that be? I will go home today and have it packed up and sent to the palace to be presented to Your Majesty."

Qizhe smiled in satisfaction.

After a little while, I asked for leave to withdraw. I had already turned around when I heard Qizhe speak behind me. "Chengjun."

I looked back. Qizhe was leaning back in his chair, looking at me. "Don't worry. We will make certain that no new princess crosses your threshold."

I bowed again. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Upon leaving the imperial study, I walked slowly along the path. For some reason, when Qizhe had called me "Chengjun," it had given me a peculiar sensation.

I remember the first time Qizhe called me by my courtesy name. It was the day his reign formally began and also his fifteenth birthday. I had come to the palace with a jade scepter to congratulate him. As the occasion was a formal one, I performed full obeisance and prostrated myself. It was then that I heard Qizhe say, "Rise, Chengjun."

All the ministers were gathered in the great hall. When he said this, an absolute hush fell over the hall.

I raised my head slightly, stunned.

After a moment of quiet, the empress dowager, sitting beside him, stood and said, "How can Your Majesty address Prince Huai like this? He is Your Majesty's imperial uncle. It's improper to call an elder by name!"

Qizhe pressed his lips together in silence. His clear, bright eyes were focused on me.

"The empress dowager overstates the matter," I quickly said with a smile. "It is a form of affectionate favor for His Majesty to address me in this way. While I am His Majesty's uncle, before that I am His Majesty's subject. Indeed, I must express my gratitude that His Majesty is willing to address me by name."

I touched my head to the ground again. "Thank you, Your Majesty." When I rose, I saw Qizhe still looking at me, but now there was a trace of a smile on his lips.

From that day forward, Qizhe's form of address toward me became confused. He called me Imperial Uncle, Prince Huai, or Chengjun according to his whims. I wasn't strongly attached to any form of address, and, anyway, he was the emperor; I had no choice but to go along with his moods.

It was also from then on that Qizhe seemed to become a different person. Before, he had been a taciturn child, even a little frail. After taking up the reins of power, he altered day by day, as if undergoing a complete transformation.

Qizhe had been appointed crown prince at birth. His upbringing had been different from the late emperor's other sons, and he had seldom left the palace. In his generation of princes and princes' sons, he had originally been the most distant from me.

Until one particular year. I remember that he looked to be about nine or ten. The late emperor was still alive then, and so was my mother. She was celebrating her birthday that day, shortly after the New Year. Qitan, Qifei, and the other princes had come with their consort mothers to play at Huai Manor; Qili, Qiqian, and the other princes' sons, as well as Yun Yu, Wang Xuan, and the other sons of important courtiers had also come with the grown-ups. The empress made an unexpected appearance as well, and even brought the crown prince, Qizhe. My mother hardly had time to greet all the distinguished guests who had come for her birthday. Children don't like to attend banquets; they rushed out into the back garden to play. A dusting of snow was still falling as a whole passel of children ran around in the snow and rolled snowballs. The attendants were on tenterhooks.

Only Qizhe sat on the veranda, wrapped in a fur coat as he watched the others play. Because he was crown prince and would one day be emperor, the whole crowd of children, having received instructions from the adults, didn't dare play with him in such a carefree manner. What if they shoved or yanked the future emperor in their roughhousing? He might remember it when he inherited the throne.

So Qizhe could only sit there. His hand warmer, cushion, backrest, and even teacup had all been brought from the palace. A crowd of young and old eunuchs stood by to attend him. He sat there not moving a muscle, like a puppet child.

I also stood on the veranda, keeping an eye on the children to ensure they didn't trip and fall. If anything happened, I went to help. As I stood watch, I saw an old eunuch offer tea to the little crown prince with a little velvet handkerchief under

the cup. The little crown prince put his hand warmer on his knees and solemnly raised his little hands to take the teacup. He took tiny sips. The sight made me want to laugh.

Perhaps Qizhe noticed me looking at him. He turned his bright black eyes on me, then immediately lowered his lashes and turned his head away.

I thought to myself, *The empress has raised this prince to be fussier than a little princess.* Comparing him to my other nephews as they ran around the courtyard like wild rabbits was enough to send anyone into a dither.

As I thought this, Qizhe once more turned his head to look at me. When I looked at him, he responded again by turning his head away immediately.

Perhaps the child was shy and felt awkward. I was just thinking I might coax a few words out of him when, in the courtyard, Qitan, Qili and the other children shouted, "Uncle Jun, Uncle Jun…"

I trotted over. Qitan pointed at a plum blossom tree and said, "Uncle Jun, I want a flower!"

I reached up to pick one, but Qitan tugged on my robe and said, "I want to pick it myself!"

So I held him up so he could pick the plum blossom himself. Once Qitan was back on the ground, Qifei, Qili, and the others gathered around my knees, clamoring that they wanted flowers too. I held each of them up in turn until the plum blossom tree was half bald.

Among the late emperor's sons, Qifei had always been fearfully canny. Holding up his flower, he said, "I'm going to give this to my brother the crown prince." He trotted over to the veranda to give it to Qizhe. The other children also ran, following him from the courtyard, chirping and buzzing. One child, I forget which, bumped into the eunuch beside Qizhe. The eunuch stumbled, and the tea in the pot he was holding spilled right onto Qizhe.

There was instant chaos. The tea wasn't scalding, and Qizhe's clothes were thick, but he still got half-soaked, and the eunuch was so scared that his hands shook uncontrollably. I had to go pick Qizhe up. Next to me, someone berated the child responsible for the accident.

It was then that Qizhe unexpectedly spoke: "There is nothing the matter with me. Do not scold him or punish him."

His tone was extraordinarily unperturbed. I was surprised in spite of myself. Children these days really were each more mature than the last.

Qizhe's clothes were soaked through, but he had nothing to change into on hand, and my mother and I were not bold enough to give the crown prince my old childhood clothes to wear. In the end we had him take off his outer layer for the time being and sit on a bed wrapped in a quilt while someone went to the palace to fetch him fresh clothes. He sat there, still not moving a muscle. I asked him if he wanted to eat a pastry. He nodded silently with his eyes cast down. I asked whether he wanted a walnut cookie or a mixed-nut cake. He looked at the two plates and still said nothing. I had to bring both plates up to him. He looked at the walnut cookie plate. Only when I picked up a cookie and presented it to him did his hand reach out of the quilt to take it. He brought it to his lips and nibbled on it.

An old eunuch said to me with a smile, "His Highness the Crown Prince isn't very fond of speaking when he visits an unfamiliar place."

I felt overpowering unease at this.

From that day forward, when Qitan and the others occasionally came to Huai Manor to play, Qizhe came with them. Perhaps because he had become better acquainted with me on my mother's birthday, he came with fewer attendants and less ceremony, about the same as the late emperor's other sons, and he wasn't as constrained as he had been that day. He became more and more open, except that he still didn't talk much. When he saw me at the palace, he would greet me, awkwardly calling out, "Uncle Jun."

When my father had been out on the battlefield, he had loved to bring home rare and strange items. It was in large part on account of these things that the late emperor's sons enjoyed coming to Huai Manor so much, especially Qitan. He never stood on ceremony when he took a fancy to something. He had to have it, even if it took throwing a tantrum. But Qizhe was different. He never asked for anything, only looked. If he took a liking to something, he would keep looking at it, apparently indifferent, till I couldn't stand it anymore and brought the thing to him and asked whether it was to the crown prince's liking. Then he would say with great dignity, "Yes, it's acceptable." He would take it and stash it away, acting as if I had begged him to accept it.

So I thought to myself then that, while this child was a little reserved, on this point, he really did have the makings of an emperor.

As I walked, I recalled the past, and felt unexpectedly moved. In the blink of an eye, my imperial nephews had all grown up. I had made it this far without thinking anything of it, but looking back, I realized that many years had passed.

I stood by the palace wall and watched the floating clouds on the horizon. I couldn't resist sighing with emotion. "Oh, how quickly the years go by…"

Behind me, a voice said, "Your Highness Prince Huai."

If a moment ago I had felt like an old scholar tree watching the green saplings around me shoot up graceful and tender, when I heard that voice, I instantly felt like a willow branch in a late spring breeze whose leaves had just turned the perfect green.

I turned to look at him. In a voice like a soft willow frond, I said, "Chancellor Liu."

I waited for Liu Tongyi to reach me, then walked beside him. He said to me, "I think I just heard Your Highness lamenting the passage of the years. Were you moved by the sight of the setting sun?"

With an embarrassed smile, I said, "No, I happened to think of the past, so I felt a little nostalgic."

Liu Tongyi made an understanding sound. Keeping my composure, I snuck a glance at his quietly elegant face. If he had been someone else and said precisely the same thing—Yun Yu, for example, or Qitan, Qili, or any of the rest—he would certainly have been teasing me.

But how could Ransi tease me?

He must have been expounding on an artistic conception, like a poem. It was just that I was too vulgar myself and had understood the words to be vulgar. But my response couldn't betray my weakness. I had to match Ransi by being more poetic.

So I looked at the setting sun, which was still bright enough to dazzle, and said gently, "Chancellor Liu, do you like to watch the sunset? Every time I see the setting sun, I think of poetry. The words float in my mind like ruddy clouds in the sky."

Liu Tongyi brought his sleeve up to his mouth and gave a gentle cough. I waited and heard no response from him. I quickly asked, "Are you unwell, Chancellor Liu? Would you like me to see you home?"

With a trace of a smile, Liu Tongyi said, "Oh, it's nothing. There was just something in my throat."

Perhaps I was too moved by the sunset. Suddenly I asked Liu Tongyi a question I thought I would never dare to ask.

"Chancellor Liu," I asked, "what do you think of me?"

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. What could he think of me? He certainly wouldn't tell the truth to my face.

Sure enough, Liu Tongyi stared at me. At least his expression remained unchanged. He said, "Why does Your Highness ask?"

I quickly said, "Oh, it's nothing. Perhaps too much has been happening lately, and I've started to feel a little heavyhearted. If you don't want to answer, then take my question as unasked."

"Be at ease, Your Highness," said Liu Tongyi. "Some things are best left in the past."

In saying so, he gently bypassed my question. When I heard this, I felt a peculiar sensation. He had steered the conversation away because that question had been inconvenient to answer, but he preferred not to answer rather than fob me off with jargon. I felt a little gratified. While his words of consolation were only said out of politeness, I was still happy to be comforted by him.

I don't know why I should have fallen in love with Liu Tongyi; given the present situation at court, even if that rotten old man Wang Qin one day began carrying on a clandestine love affair with the empress dowager, Liu Tongyi and I would still never stand together.

The Lius were an illustrious noble family whose ancestor had aided our first emperor in establishing the dynasty and received the position of imperial chancellor in return. Official families often live up to the folk saying that wealth doesn't last out three generations, and fame doesn't last five, but the Liu clan has always flourished. Each generation has produced one or two senior officials who unwaveringly repaid the court's favor, sparing no effort to perform their duty. If only a single plaque of honor for a loyal family existed in the world, then it would surely hang above the door of the Liu residence.

Liu Tongyi's grandfather, Liu Xian, had a younger sister who had been the Tongguang emperor's empress. When the Tongguang emperor was still on the throne and my father was a young man who had just set foot on the battlefield, then supervisor of the Imperial Censorate and brother-in-law to the emperor Liu Xian repeatedly submitted memorials to the Tongguang emperor asking that, for the sake of his throne and the crown prince's future, His Majesty refrain from giving an imperial prince too much military authority. He strongly advised that the Tongguang emperor keep my father in idleness. Luckily, the emperor did not listen, but later, his son, the late emperor, kept his guard up against my father as if against a would-be thief. His Uncle Liu Xian's contributions there had been indispensable.

Liu Tongyi's father also once had a great future ahead of him, but sadly his luck was poor. Just after he became the fourth-rank prefect of the Jiangdong Prefecture, he contracted lung disease in the course of managing a flood and died young.

Liu Tongyi was a few years older than Qizhe, Qitan, Qili, Yun Yu, and the others. There was no connection between the Liu residence and Huai Manor, and he had only returned to the capital after his father died of illness, so I had seen nothing of him as a child.

The first time I met him would have been at the palace. I think it was the fifteenth day of the eighth month, the Mid-Autumn Festival. The late emperor was already quite seriously ill at the time, but he had still exerted himself to hold a moon-viewing banquet in the imperial gardens. The important ministers and their sons had all been invited. Liu Xian must have been in his seventies or eighties then, his hair and beard white, but he had still come tottering to attend. He remained the head of the court's honest officials. Seated at the banquet, he was like the full moon itself. My future father-in-law, Li Yue, and the other so-called loyal ministers and able generals who professed themselves aloof from politics clustered around him like stars. Of course there was no place for me among them. I had to sit among my cousin princes or with Yun Tang, Wang Qin, and such others. I was still quite young then and had nothing to say to them either. I felt dreadfully dull, so I drank some cups of wine and, on the pretext of going to empty my bladder, went for a stroll through the imperial gardens' shrubbery.

Qitan, Qili, and so on were running around amusing themselves in the imperial gardens with palace maids and eunuchs going in circles after them. I stood there watching them awhile, then headed for somewhere quieter. Upon coming to the imperial pond, I finally stood still.

A gentle breeze, a bright moon, the scent of osmanthus flowers, and a sky full of stars floating upon the surface of the water. Vapor mingled with the scent of flowers and poured into my spirit. I felt my heart become as clear as the pond water.

I stood there for a time. Just as I was about to move on, at the far end of the covered walkway beside the pond where I was headed, I saw a seated youth.

I wouldn't say I was a cutsleeve back then. But presented with such a scene, with such a moon, such a breeze, such water, such a scent of flowers, at my first glimpse of that beautiful and elegant youth, for an instant I thought he was the spirit of the osmanthus flowers given human form.

It was only a momentary daze. When I looked again, I knew that wasn't the case.

The youth appeared to be fifteen or sixteen years old, dressed in a thin robe. Though he seemed subdued, it was clear at a glance there was nothing ordinary about him. He leaned against a pillar of the walkway as he sat on the steps, holding a book in his hands and reading it by the light of the lantern above his head.

He must have been part of some courtier's family, but why had he brought a book to an imperial banquet and snuck off here to read it?

I guessed that either this youth really did love books as much as his own life, or a family elder had instructed him to do this. If someone saw him, especially the emperor, he would ask, *What family does this diligent youth belong to?* That should get his reputation off the ground.

The youth hadn't noticed me. He held his book in both hands, all his attention apparently focused on reading. It seemed he wasn't doing it for show.

I stood there, then stepped forward. "Aren't you worried that reading by such dim light will damage your eyesight?"

The youth seemed startled. He raised his head, quickly shut the book in his hands, and stood. I smiled and took a couple more steps forward. His expression gradually calmed. He bowed and said, "Greetings, Your Highness Prince Huai."

Presumably we had met earlier at the banquet, but I hadn't taken notice.

"No need for such formality," I said. "Just speak naturally. Which family do you belong to? Why have you come here to read?"

"My name is Liu Tongyi," he answered. "Liu Xian is my grandfather."

So he was Liu Xian's grandson. It was understandable then that he would have run off to a quiet place to read. He stood there with an easy manner and the refinement of a person raised amid stacks of Confucian classics, befitting of a scion of the Liu clan.

He was very good-looking now, but perhaps in another decade, there would be a young Liu Xian at court.

Alas, what a pity to lose the youth he was now.

I scrutinized him, from his face to the book in his hands, and found that despite his easy and respectful manner, his sleeves were shaking slightly. He was in the process of stealthily concealing the book he had been reading in his sleeve.

"What were you reading just now?" I asked with feigned indifference.

Liu Tongyi's expression appeared a little discomfited, but he still said with apparent ease, "Oh, an ordinary book."

"Can you show me?" I asked.

"Uh, it's just the standard *Mencius*. Your Highness Prince Huai must have read it." As he said this, his eyes flickered, like water rippling in the moonlight.

I glanced at the blue corner sticking out of his sleeve. "Is that so." I came a little closer and took hold of the sleeve where he was hiding the book, then looked down into his eyes and said, smiling, "You must not have much experience reading books in secret. You have to pay attention to whether the book is upside down when you hide it in your sleeve. You've even shown me the title."

I raised his arm and took the book from his sleeve. Written on the cover was the title: *The Legend of the Red-Bearded Hero*. This was a chivalric romance that had once been popular in the bookbinderies.

Liu Xian's grandson was reading *this*?

I looked at him in astonishment. "Is your name really Liu, not Wang or Yun?"

The Wang and Yun children were all crafty. If they were caught misbehaving, they could lie about who they were without batting an eyelash.

He looked at me a little doubtfully, his eyes as utterly clear as the water of the star-filled pond.

I rolled up the book and did right by him: "*The Legend of the Red-Bearded Hero* is an imitation, plagiarized from *The Divine White Jade Sword*, and inferior to it. Moreover, this copy you have is a censored edition."

He gave an exclamation and said, "I think this edition is already excellent. While the language is direct and unornamented, it is precise and penetrating. The poetry appears crude at first glance, but carefully considered, it feels exceptionally apt."

Watching him speak so earnestly, I couldn't help feeling amused. He must have been telling the truth about being Liu Xian's grandson. "That's because you haven't read anything better. Among writers of storybooks and romances, this Master of Snowstorm House can only be considered average, and his language is all copied from the Scholar of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills, the author of *The Divine White Jade Sword.* There are also other authors, such as the Mad Drunkard, Bai Ruyi, and so on—they are truly outstanding."

Liu Tongyi's eyes were bright, his expression rapt.

I continued, "You'll be able to find them if you sneak over to a bookbindery. In the southwest corner of the capital, on Copper Coin Lane, is a shop that's quite well-stocked, where you can even buy uncensored editions."

Liu Tongyi's eyes shone even brighter. Looking into them, I couldn't help adding, "Although… you should probably still buy the clean editions. The full editions might not be a good fit for you."

These romances had many descriptions of love between their heroes and various women. The so-called clean editions were what was left over after these parts were excised. I certainly wouldn't read them, but I was worried the things in the full editions would be indigestible to Liu Xian's grandson.

Frowning slightly, Liu Tongyi said, "Why?"

I could only say vaguely, "The full editions can be slightly explicit concerning matters between men and women."

Liu Tongyi said, "How…"

He must have wanted to ask how they were explicit, but as soon as the single word "how" was out of his mouth, he had a realization and fell silent. I looked at him by moonlight and lamplight; his face seemed slightly flushed.

I couldn't resist saying with a laugh, "Haha, you see? Like I said, you're better off reading the clean editions."

Liu Tongyi stared at me without speaking. His blush seemed to deepen.

As I laughed, I heard distant footsteps approaching us and returned the book to him at once. "Someone's coming. Hide the book well, and remember when you read it in secret at home not to hide it in your bedding, or it may be shaken out by servants making the bed. Under the bed board is a more reliable hiding place." I drew closer to him and whispered, "I got beaten when I was little because I didn't hide my books properly. It's a bloody tale."

Liu Tongyi had been listening with unwavering attention. Now he laughed.

The footsteps came closer and closer. I heard someone calling for me: "Your Highness Prince Huai? Is that Your Highness over there? His Majesty has summoned you."

So I hurriedly bade farewell to Liu Tongyi, who tucked the book into his sleeve properly and stood there. As I turned the corner of the path, I saw him leaving by the walkway as well.

After that, I did not see him again, and the Liu family was not fond of publicity, so I heard hardly any news of him either. Bit by bit, the encounter left my mind till I had all but forgotten it.

I remembered him only some years later. It was not long after Qizhe's personal reign began, when Liu Tongyi was named the Zhuangyuan, first place graduate of that year's palace examinations, and his name spread overnight throughout the capital.

At the Qionglin Banquet held to honor the top three graduates of the palace examination, I was among those in attendance. As a rule, the banquet was held in the imperial gardens, right beside the imperial pond.

When I arrived at the palace, the three new top graduates and the officials attending the banquet were all present. Only the emperor had yet to arrive. I entered the gardens and from a distance glimpsed the bright red robe of the Zhuangyuan among a cluster of peonies. Once again, the events of the fifteenth day of the eighth month some years ago came to mind. I wondered what that youth who had been reading a popular novel in stealth had become. He had indeed been surpassingly beautiful at the time, but there are people who are good-looking when young but, as they mature, grow in an incredibly ugly direction. I hoped he didn't look like Liu Xian minus the beard, wrinkles, and white hair.

I was prepared to meet him and take an idle moment to ask whether he had gone on to read *The Divine White Jade Sword*, and had he read the full edition or the clean one?

The figure in the red Zhuangyuan robe had its back to me, in conversation with the second- and third-place graduates and some elderly courtiers. The first to see me was the secretariat director, who was facing the path, and he said at once, smiling, "His Highness Prince Huai is here. Greetings, Your Highness."

Disclaiming formality, I came forward. The others turned around, and I saw that red-robed figure turn as well. As he did, night ended above the star-filled pond shining in the moonlight of years past, and the morning sun shone bright. The lingering osmanthus fragrance dispersed, and the parasol tree leaves grew green, the crape myrtle flowers dense.

He lifted his sleeves and bowed his head. "Respectful greetings to Your Highness Prince Huai."

I heard my own voice say, "No need for such formality, Zhuangyuan Liu." And in that moment, there was no way I could have brought myself to deliver my prepared quip.

People are so strange. The whole world takes me for a treacherous prince, and I have always felt unbearably wronged by it, always viewed myself as a loyal subject and a good person. But when I saw Liu Tongyi, I knew instantly that he and I would never be the same kind of person. It was as if a line were drawn before me, plain as day. He stood on the other side of it, like the clearest of clear lakes under the sun, and I stood on this side, like a pot of cloudy noodle broth. All around us, there was brightness in the dark, darkness in the bright, and none of it as pure as

the patch of blue sky above his head.

In a low voice, Yun Tang said, "In a few years we'll have another Liu Xian."

"Perhaps," I said. "And perhaps he'll surpass Liu Xian." At the very least he wouldn't have Liu Xian's face.

It was over a year ago now that Liu Tongyi had taken up the imperial chancellor's seal and stood in his blue robe of office at the head of the court. Never before in the history of this dynasty had a man under thirty been appointed imperial chancellor. He was the youngest person in centuries to wear that robe and stand in that position. Yun Tang said to me, "Your Highness Prince Huai's eye is accurate indeed." I modestly said, "I do all right."

That copy of *The Legend of the Red-Bearded Hero* once read beneath the glass lantern in the walkway of the imperial gardens might have been buried in some corner beneath sage essays and strategies of administration, or perhaps it had long since been turned into a heap of ashes, swept up, and dusted off.

But at the Qionglin Banquet in the imperial gardens, and when he first stood before the court in his robe of office, I stuck slivers of my soul fast to his sleeve. Like a donkey on a leash, I knew that it was stupid to keep going in circles but had no choice but to revolve around him.

The ancients had a saying—when brought to a certain pass by the pangs of love, a man becomes a sage.

I didn't know whether in my present situation I amounted to a minor sage or a great sage.

I snuck another glance at Liu Tongyi walking beside me. It would have been better if he, like Yun Yu, could have worn brighter colors more often, and better still if his hair wasn't always entirely up.

Supposing that in the future I truly did accomplish some staggering labor of loyalty, perhaps that line would disappear. If I asked him then to walk shoulder to shoulder with me, in spirit as well as in body, would he be willing?

Though Liu Tongyi was always in my mind, I had never thought of anything really happening between us. At most I had thought that the preceding scenario might come true, or perhaps in addition to that we could occasionally play weiqi, chat, drink tea, things of that nature.

That would be plenty.

I was moved by my own inner world and on the point of once again sighing with emotion as I looked upon the setting sun.

An irascible voice said darkly beside me, "Imperial Uncle—"

My soul was immediately rankled back from the evening glow into my mortal shell. I turned my head and saw Qitan's face, as irascible as his voice.

I was astonished. "Where did you crop up from?"

Qitan looked at me dolefully. "Imperial Uncle, I followed you all this way and called to you so many times, and you wouldn't even look at me."

"Oh, well," I said, "I had something on my mind. I didn't notice."

My mind had been wandering something fierce. Perhaps I had forgotten myself in front of Ransi.

Feigning nonchalance, I swept a glance over at Liu Tongyi. His expression was normal, with a trace of a smile at the corners of his lips; it was probably all right.

I was just about to speak again when a languid voice behind me said, "Your Highness Prince Dai, I believe I was right to say His Highness Prince Huai wouldn't come back to himself before he reached the palace gate. You've lost the bet."

The speaker came up beside Qitan. "Supervisor Yun," I said, "why are you in the same place as Qitan?"

Yun Yu smiled. Qitan raced to speak first: "Imperial Uncle, Supervisor Yun and I happened across each other while chasing after you and Chancellor Liu. Don't misunderstand."

What do you mean, "don't misunderstand"?

Smiling, Yun Yu said, "Your Highness Prince Huai and Chancellor Liu have met again?"

"Oh, yes, also a coincidence, a mere coincidence," I said.

Liu Tongyi stopped walking and said, "Your Highness Prince Huai, it seems His Highness Prince Dai has urgent business to discuss. I will bid you farewell."

"Please stay," I said.

Qitan echoed, "Please stay, Chancellor Liu."

Yun Yu stood by and watched.

"Was there something else, Your Highnesses?" said Liu Tongyi.

"Oh," I said, "it was nothing. Only, I thought Prince Dai might not only have been looking for me but also had something to say to Chancellor Liu, so I asked if you would stay for the moment."

Yun Yu chipped in, "Yes, Your Highness Prince Huai put in a timely word to keep Chancellor Liu back before His Highness Prince Dai could speak. It seems that His Highness Prince Dai does indeed have something important to say to Chancellor Liu."

It seemed Yun Yu was having a close match with my nephew Qitan today; each said something more awkward than the last.

Fortunately, Liu Tongyi seemed not to have noticed any implications. With perfect timing, Qitan said, "It's like this. The other day I put Chancellor Liu and my imperial uncle Prince Huai to the trouble of appraising a fake antique for me, which saved me a considerable sum of money that would otherwise have been wrongly spent. I have put together a banquet at my residence and entreat my imperial uncle and Chancellor Liu to honor me with their presence tonight."

It wasn't in vain that I had doted on Qitan since he was little. The child grew more and more capable all the time.

Liu Tongyi made no strenuous efforts to decline. He agreed readily. Of course I had no reason not to agree.

"I see I have no business here," said Yun Yu, "so I will take my leave."

He made to turn away. Qitan immediately said, "I entreat Supervisor Yun to honor me with his presence as well. I was the loser in our bet just now, so I ought to invite you to dinner." Then to me he said, "Right, Imperial Uncle?"

Why was Qitan talking so strangely today?

All I could do was nod and say, "Of course, of course. That's only natural."

Yun Yu looked at Qitan, then at me. He said, "Then I really will go. Do not hide your fine wine, Your Highness Prince Dai."

Qitan answered at once, smiling, "Of course. I am sure my imperial uncle wouldn't allow it."

With the gate of the imperial palace before us, Qitan suddenly tugged on my sleeve and kept me back a couple of steps. He put on a suggestive smile and whispered into my ear, "Imperial Uncle, Supervisor Yun and I followed you for ages, watching you with all your attention focused on walking beside Chancellor Liu. At dinner, leave Chancellor Liu to me. You can focus on talking to Supervisor Yun."

I choked on the wind. "Supervisor Yun?"

Qitan flapped my sleeve and winked. "Imperial Uncle, outsiders may not be able to tell, but your nephew knows everything."

You know... what?

Qitan said in my ear, "I was just saying to my imperial brother how these last few years you've… well…" Tossing out this statement, he released my sleeve and made straight for Liu Tongyi. "Chancellor Liu!"

So now I knew who had spoken before the emperor to make him say there was something more to my relationship with Yun Yu.

I had nothing left to hope for from Prince Dai. My lungs ached from vexation, and I couldn't even call him a little bastard, because if he was a little bastard, that made me the little bastard's uncle.

Settling my breathing, I went home to change into casual clothes, then came to Dai Manor.

Liu Tongyi and Yun Yu had both already taken their seats. Qitan really knew how to put on a production. With four people eating, he had set two tables.

The two long narrow tables faced each other, one on either side of the small hall. Food and wine were laid out on both tables and two chairs had been placed at each one. One table for him and Liu Tongyi, one for me and Yun Yu. Quite a skillful partition.

The whole width of the center of the hall lay between the two tables, eighteen thousand li in all.

"There are only four of us eating," I said, "and neither Chancellor Liu nor Supervisor Yun is an outsider. Couldn't you just have laid one table? It would be cheerful and companionable. You can't be worried that Supervisor Yun and I will fight you for the food?"

"You, Chancellor Liu, and Supervisor Yun are all honored guests," said Qitan. "It would be too vulgar to heap a single table with dishes. That's no way to receive any of you. I have made other arrangements." Saying so, he picked up a pitcher to pour wine for Liu Tongyi. "Chancellor Liu, if you'll permit me."

Liu Tongyi half rose from his seat. "That is too great an honor for me. I will pour for myself."

He took the pitcher from Qitan. Perhaps it was my mistake, but Qitan seemed to brush Liu Tongyi's hand.

Yun Yu was holding a wine pitcher and pouring wine. He gently elbowed my arm and aimed a look in Qitan's direction. He had seen it too. So I wasn't being oversensitive.

As I ate, I watched the table opposite. Qitan was a flurry of movement, pausing hardly at all.

"Chancellor Liu, try this. This came from the western regions' tribute. It's called something-something-ke sausage and contains foreign pork, not like our ordinary pork."

Vulgar.

“Chancellor Liu, what do you think of this dish? Too bland, or too strong?”

I put down my empty cup and picked up the wine pitcher to refill it. Yun Yu idly pushed almonds around in a dish with his chopsticks. Qitan had expended all his skills on Liu Tongyi today; Yun Yu didn’t eat sweet and salty foods, and the dishes in front of him just happened to be exactly those.

I rolled up my sleeve and swapped two of his dishes with untouched ones in front of me. Yun Yu said quietly to me, “Why does it strike me that Prince Dai is competing with you, Your Highness?”

I frowned. I recalled that Qitan had never shared my interests. Yun Yu, with a false smile, said, “Your Highness is free not to believe me. Would you like to make a bet?”

Soon, I understood the true motive behind Qitan’s solicitousness.

Two domestics brought a small table to the center of the room. On it was a brocade box.

Smiling brightly, Qitan said to Liu Tongyi, “Chancellor Liu, I’ve never had any indulgence apart from collecting antiques. Now that I have you here, there are a few things I’d like to trouble you to have a look at for me.” He set down his ivory chopsticks and clapped. The two servants opened the box and lifted out a jade vase.

Qitan said, “This is said to be a love token given by Lü Buwei to Lady Zhao.[6] A sprig of peach blossoms is featured on the vase, expressing love. What does Chancellor Liu think of this vase?”

Liu Tongyi looked at the vase and, with a faint smile, said, “The jade is good quality.”

Then he said nothing further.

Qitan waited, then asked, “Its provenance?”

“I cannot be certain,” said Liu Tongyi.

Qitan’s expression dimmed. He wasn’t stupid in matters like these. Liu Tongyi had noticed something amiss but couldn’t very well say so.

Qitan waved a hand. The two servants packed up the vase in its brocade box and bore it away. Then they returned bearing another box with a wine pitcher inside it. Qitan said that it was of roughly the same period as the vase and had been used by Ying Zheng.[7]

Liu Tongyi praised the pattern on the pot, and then once more refrained from saying more. Qitan’s expression darkened again.

I sat there looking on as he had item after item brought out, and drooped increment by increment at each appraisal. I couldn’t quite bear to watch. I

whispered feelingly to Yun Yu, "He's already bought them. He may as well set them out as though they were real. Why submit himself to such torment?"

Yun Yu shot me a glance. "Your Highness Prince Huai appears greatly distressed."

I sighed. "Of course I'm distressed. More of my own money went into those things than Prince Dai's."

Yun Yu raised a hand to refill my wine cup. "Your Highness's money went to doting on your nephew. It didn't go to waste." His smile showed great delight in my misery.

Qitan's precious antiques were still being brought in one after another. No sooner had a clay horse been taken away than a pretty serving girl came forward gracefully bearing a jade tray.

"Why is it a lovely lady this time?" Yun Yu asked.

"You may not be aware, Supervisor Yun," said Qitan, "that this treasure can only be handled by a woman."

The beautiful serving girl knelt with the jade tray in her hands. On the tray lay a piece of yellow silk cloth, upon which was a piece of jade.

Qitan said, "This was a grave good that a lady of the former Kingdom of Wu was buried holding in her mouth. It can prevent a corpse from rotting and keep it looking as it did in life. It holds strong yin energy in it, so no matter what the season, it is cold as a piece of ice in winter. Will you feel it, Chancellor Liu?"

I could not help saying, "A thing from the mouth of a corpse, and you ask Chancellor Liu to touch it at the dinner table? Do you wish to keep Chancellor Liu from eating?"

Qitan paused. Then, as if this had just occurred to him, he apologized repeatedly. Liu Tongyi naturally said it was no matter, and he really did reach out to touch the piece of jade. He said, "This item is a true treasure, a rare sight. I have only read of it in books and never thought to see it with my own eyes in Your Highness's residence today. This is the blessing of three lifetimes."

Qitan was startled. His eyes glazed over and fixed upon Liu Tongyi. "Chancellor Liu, are you telling the truth?"

Liu Tongyi smiled. "This item in Your Highness's collection is truly extraordinary."

Qitan's face opened like the seed of a sterculia in water. His smile was radiant.

Liu Tongyi stood and went to the washroom to clean his hands. Qitan, holding his wine cup, stared after him. He tipped back his head and drained the rest of his wine

in one gulp. "Imperial Uncle, I just had a thought…"

I saw the peculiar light shining in his eyes, and instinct told me that he was about to say something just as peculiar to match.

Sure enough, Qitan, squeezing his wine cup and rotating it, stared at some point in empty space as he said, "Just now, when Chancellor Liu smiled at me like that… I suddenly thought that if he were a woman, I would certainly wed him!"

Qitan looked at me with a burning gaze. "Imperial Uncle, do you think I'm becoming like you…"

Unexpectedly, the first thing I thought of was Qitan's young wife, who at only seventeen years old was reported to be eight months pregnant.

"You ought to give careful consideration to this question," I said.

Qitan squeezed his wine cup again. "Consideration has no place in this. Imperial Uncle, I always tell you the truth, and Supervisor Yun is hardly an outsider. How can a thing like this be up to me?" No wine remained in his cup, but he still brought it to his lips. "Just now, when Chancellor Liu nodded like that and smiled, my heart… my heart beat fast…"

Yun Yu said, "Prince Dai's symptoms do resemble Your Highness's somewhat."

I shot a glance at Qitan. "Your heart beat fast, did it? Here, I have something to show you."

I felt around in my clothes and produced an item I had prepared in advance. I raised it.

"While doing battle in foreign parts, my father took this piece of jade from the body of a khan. He presented it to the Tongguang emperor, who then graciously granted my father possession of it. It was passed down among the foreigners from generation to generation since the Han period, and its authenticity is undeniable."

Qitan's eyes glazed over again. His gaze was glued to the piece of jade in my hand. "Imperial Uncle…"

I waggled the jade ornament. "Is your heart beating fast?"

Qitan's eyes were filled with ardor. He nodded. "Yes."

"Do you feel the same looking at me as you did earlier looking at Chancellor Liu?" I asked.

Qitan's face flushed bright red at once. He nodded again.

I put the piece of jade away and said solemnly, "No need to worry. You aren't a cutsleeve."

Qitan's eyes were fixed on the place where I had stashed the piece of jade, his gaze like a hook.

I pretended not to see, lifted the wine pitcher, and poured myself a cup. I counseled him earnestly, "You aren't a child anymore, and there are words you ought to weigh carefully in your mind before you say them aloud. Had what you said just now been overheard, I would have been standing accused. Your mother would have come to settle the score with me, or else she would have gone to the empress dowager to complain that you were spending all your time with me, and I had led you astray."

The two hooks in Qitan's eyes glittered bright as snow. He said, "Imperial Uncle, you are indeed solicitous toward your nephew. I only said what I did because I was talking to you, and Supervisor Yun is part of our circle. Through your instruction, Imperial Uncle, I have seen the light. Only, I thought that while the feeling was similar just now, it still wasn't precisely the same as when I was looking at Chancellor Liu. Won't you demonstrate it again for me, Imperial Uncle?"

"This is as far as my instruction goes," I said placidly. "The rest depends on your own comprehension."

Qitan dimmed and bent his head to serve himself food. I added, "Most importantly, when Chancellor Liu returns, don't say anything to his face that might lead to a misunderstanding. Chancellor Liu is a man of high moral character, a pillar of His Majesty's court. You cannot be too irreverent."

Yun Yu said, smiling, "Your Highnesses have such an affectionate relationship."

Qitan picked up his food. "Imperial Uncle, Liu Tongyi must have seen everything there is to see to get his chancellor's rank. Everyone who's friendly with him says that Chancellor Liu is different from all the other Lius. He is easygoing, open-minded, and extremely understanding. Why do you imagine him to be such a pedant, Imperial Uncle? What's more," he said, tugging one side of his mouth into a suggestive smile, "Chancellor Liu is two years older than Supervisor Yun and still unmarried. Who knows what might be the reason for that…"

For some reason, when I heard his concluding remark, it felt as though my heart were being raked by claws, then squeezed. I coughed and said, "Do not discuss people behind their backs. If Chancellor Liu should come back and overhear…"

At this point, a daub of pale blue-green appeared at the door, and I hastily shut my mouth. Liu Tongyi stepped inside and resumed his seat. Qitan said, "You're back, Chancellor Liu. I was just discussing you behind your back with my imperial uncle. My imperial uncle praised you as a man of high moral character, a pillar of

the court. I have never known him to praise just anyone like that. Just for that, I must ask you to determine the authenticity of a treasure my imperial uncle has brought with him today."

Qitan hadn't given up, and he would stop at nothing. When he had concluded his remarks, Liu Tongyi matter-of-factly looked my way and said with a smile, "Thank you for your praise, Your Highness Prince Huai, I am unworthy. I wonder what treasure Your Highness has brought?"

When he looked at me, it was like the sweet breeze of late spring wafting over me. "Oh, merely a foreign bauble. I won't trouble…"

Qitan cut me off midway: "Spare us the civilities, Imperial Uncle. Chancellor Liu has already agreed, and I want to take advantage of another opportunity to learn the trick of antiques appraisal from him."

I had no choice but to reach into my robes. The points of the twin hooks in Qitan's eyes reappeared, shining coldly.

I produced the piece of jade and offered it to an attendant beside me, letting him convey it to Liu Tongyi. Liu Tongyi held it and said, looking at me, "I am uninformed in the appraisal of foreign works, but from the color and grain of this jade, it must be an antique with quite a history. Besides which, I have seen the design on this ornament in a book. Since the Sui dynasty, this design has been exceedingly rare. It must date roughly to the Han dynasty; however, it is beyond me to provide more detailed observations."

I gasped in honest admiration. "Chancellor Liu's reputation as an expert is well-merited."

Qitan's face was also full of commendation. "I have been enlightened. The color and grain Chancellor Liu speaks of…" He came close, snatched the piece of jade from Liu Tongyi's hand, and brought it up to his own nose. "Is this it? Guide me through examining it."

Once it was in his hands, my piece of jade was as good as gone; there would be no turning back.

Looking at Qitan and that piece of jade, I felt a faint ache in my heart.

Liu Tongyi looked at Qitan's hand and frowned faintly. "Only, it seems that this mark here is damage made by a blade, and of recent date." He lifted his hand, took the piece of jade back from Qitan, and studied it with concentration.

"That mark was made when my late father grappled with the enemy leader, a matter of twenty-some years ago," I said.

Liu Tongyi's brow relaxed, and he said, "I see." He offered the piece of jade to the attendant beside him. "One can almost hear the clash of weapons on that battlefield."

Under Qitan's covetous gaze, I took the piece of jade back from the attendant and returned it to my robes. "Its encounter with Chancellor Liu today is like a musician meeting a kindred spirit who can comprehend his music."

I raised my cup to Liu Tongyi in a show of thanks, and he returned the civility, smiling faintly.

Yun Yu raised his cup as well, and said, "Your Highness Prince Huai's endless praise for Chancellor Liu makes me so ashamed I can hardly keep my seat."

Qitan's head was hanging glumly again, and he was just stuffing food into his mouth. He quickly put in a muffled word: "I'm the one who ought to be ashamed. Normally my imperial uncle never stops speaking of Supervisor Yun. When I said that my imperial uncle never praises just anyone, it was because Supervisor Yun isn't 'just anyone' to him."

Yun Yu leaned back in his chair and smiled. Qitan looked fawningly at me with shining eyes. "Imperial Uncle, can you show me that piece of jade again later?"

In that moment, I felt an inexpressible disappointment in my nephew Prince Dai.

"Qitan," I said seriously, "what you just said is highly open to misinterpretation. Fortunately, only Chancellor Liu is present today, and no one else. Otherwise, if someone were to think that Supervisor Yun is like me, you would be giving offense."

"What's the matter with you lately, Imperial Uncle?" Qitan said in shock. "You're like an old woman, nitpicking everything I say. As if Supervisor Yun couldn't take a joke or look after himself. Though you prefer men, Imperial Uncle, that doesn't mean everyone who isn't 'just anyone' to you must have that kind of relationship with you. Everyone understands that. Besides which, if you and Supervisor Yun really were in love, then he certainly wouldn't care. Isn't that so, Supervisor Yun?" He raised his wine cup and drank a big gulp. "Actually, though, Supervisor Yun, please don't be offended if I use you as an example. I think that my imperial uncle must be searching for a remarkable person, someone *like* yourself. My imperial uncle is currently so loose only because he hasn't truly fallen in love. His heart is unbound."

Yun Yu was still half leaning back in his chair. He raised his eyebrows.

All I could do was say stiffly, with a dry laugh, "A joke ought to stand up to scrutiny. I'm not Supervisor Yun's type."

My statement held many meanings.

First, Yun Yu was indeed not a cutsleeve.

Second, Yun Yu had the typical temperament of an aristocratic scion. His tastes were undiscriminating; he chose brothel boys and girls as it pleased him. Furthermore, everyone knew that Supervisor Yun was somewhat fastidious and only dallied with virgins. For anyone with prior involvements, be they a beauty whose praises rose to the heavens, he wouldn't spare them so much as a glance.

Third, though Yun Yu was handsome, I had known him for many years and was well acquainted with his disposition; I truly could not conceive that Supervisor Yun might one day willingly submit himself to another in bed. He was proud and ambitious; Qitan's significant hints making him out to be my lover might already have displeased him.

Qitan finally gained some comprehension. He shook his head and said, "My imperial uncle is just too romantic. I've had too much to drink and let my mouth run. I hope Supervisor Yun will forgive me."

As I was about to apologize to Yun Yu on Qitan's behalf, Yun Yu said with a smile, "No matter, Your Highness was only joking with me. As for His Highness Prince Huai's romanticism, I think you make too much of it. In reality, His Highness Prince Huai's preferences have never been incompatible with mine."

Qitan's comprehension, upon manifesting, frequently rose to a perplexing pinnacle. In this instance, he looked at me, then at Yun Yu. With an astonished and dazed expression, he said, "A-are you saying…" He looked at me again, then turned to Yun Yu, his eyes unexpectedly filled with admiration. With a sigh, he said, "I never thought he would… Supervisor Yun's tastes… are quite singular…"

For a moment I was bewildered. Then I understood and all but upended a cup of wine into my lap.

"I have always had a preference for strong flavors," Yun Yu said lightly. "My appetites are a little different from the norm, so I rarely fight over food at the table."

I sat there watching as a trace of a smile appeared on Liu Tongyi's lips. "An eminently sensible position."

Shortly thereafter, dinner ended. Yun Yu was the first to rise and excuse himself. He said he still had business to attend to and floated off.

Liu Tongyi followed suit in excusing himself, and I went after him.

Outside, before we respectively boarded carriage and sedan, I said to Liu Tongyi, "Prince Dai spoke uncouthly today and put Supervisor Yun a little out of temper, and then even I made a fool of myself. It was a wretched performance."

"Jests told at the table are forgotten as soon as they are heard," said Liu Tongyi. "I no longer recall anything. If I was discourteous in any way, I hope Your Highness will not take it to heart."

We exchanged another round of pleasantries. I watched him bend to board his sedan, then turned away and got into my carriage.

I returned to my manor, where the atmosphere was still somewhat dismal after what had transpired with the princess.

I called for a pitcher of wine and sat alone in the little garden outside my bedroom to drink.

Normally, I thought nothing of it, but tonight, sitting there under the lone moon, in the shade of the trees, a sudden sense of loneliness stole over me.

Everywhere I went, there were only false words, so false that I could no longer tell what was true.

Take Liu Tongyi; it was unrealistic to expect that he would ever say anything to me that was true and from the heart rather than mere politeness.

Earlier at Dai Manor, just before leaving, Yun Yu had said something to me, and it was only that I shouldn't forget the appointment at Yuehua Pavilion.

At Yuehua Pavilion, Yun Tang and the others would discuss with me when to act.

The arrangements of many years, the plans laid in secret, were at last about to culminate in an uprising to seize the empire.

I recall that it was years ago on a similarly moonlit night that Yun Tang and Wang Qin said to me: *An incompetent child clings to the throne, and an ignorant woman monopolizes power for her own ends. We, for the good of the nation and its people, have selected a wise leader to throw in our lot with. We wish Your Highness Prince Huai to take command.*

Total hogwash.

Qizhe's mettle as a ruler far outstripped the late emperor's; he would certainly go down in history as a wise sovereign. The empress dowager was indeed a stupid woman, but fortunately her stupidity went to the core. Once Qizhe was a little older, it would be beyond her to exercise any control over affairs of state. It was only because I was a mediocre and useless cutsleeve, and Huai Manor was reputed to have that secret power that could overthrow the government, that Yun Tang and Wang Qin had temporarily banded together and come to me. When they had used me as a ladder to get over the wall and disposed of me after seizing the throne, the two sides would face off, and the empire would go to the victor.

This was a fact that even an idiot could discern at a glance.

So I agreed.

I have been embroiled in this conspiracy with Yun Tang and Wang Qin ever since.

I remember my mother saying to me before she passed away, *Your father made too great a contribution and left behind such an encumbrance that you, your children, and grandchildren will all be mistrusted. This is how so-called affairs of state operate. Only by washing your hands of it as soon as you can and retiring to a remote place can you ensure a good ending for yourself.*

She was always so clear-sighted, yet I hadn't done what she said.

Perhaps ultimately, in me flowed some of the same hot blood that had filled my father's veins. I was just a little unsatisfied, a little discontented.

I remember my father's homecomings from the wars when I was still a child, the radiance in his face when he spoke of the battlefield. In his heart there was nothing but the nation, nothing but loyalty, nothing but the empire of the Jing clan.

But he left behind only suspicion, only a son now saddled with the reputation of a malignant tumor.

After half a lifetime of mediocrity, I just wanted to be able to do something remarkable. To make the so-called honest officials, to make everyone in the world understand that Huai Manor wasn't a den of malignant tumors, that the name "Prince Huai" was written among the ranks of loyal subjects and not on the list of traitors.

My father spent his life waging war and only wanted to bring stability to the Jing clan's empire, so all its people could live in peace. At the very least, I could be like him. This once, I could protect the empire he had guarded all his life.

For no other reason than that I had called him "Father."

And perhaps it was not in vain that Qizhe had called me "Imperial Uncle" for so many years, regardless of whether he meant it sincerely or was only going through the motions out of obligation.

But as for what would happen to me after this, what my final outcome would be, maybe I had not thought it through.

Maybe the best possible outcome for me was that Liu Tongyi might sincerely call me "Your Highness Prince Huai," that Qizhe might sincerely call me "Imperial Uncle."

Drinking alone beneath the moon, I suddenly thought that my path now was in fact even more foolish than my father's had been. What the fuck did power over the

empire have to do with me? Whether I existed or not, it would all be the same. Even if I weren't there to spy on Yun Tang and Wang Qin, perhaps their uprising would still fail. At worst, perhaps neither of them would have his power ripped out at the roots, and an occasional small brouhaha might arise. But as long as the heads were gone, it would be hard for the hangers-on to get anywhere.

What need was there for me to be a spy?

If I didn't do it, I would be the same old mediocre Prince Huai, viewed as a malignant tumor by the honest officials, suspected all my life by my nephew the emperor and his mother.

So all the stirring motives I had thought of were false. Maybe my only goal was to win myself a good reputation.

I didn't know yet whether that was possible.

This is how thinking works. The more you think, the deeper you go, and the more you go in circles. Finally, I drank myself into a stupor, discovered in a murky daze that my eyes had closed, then opened my eyes in the same murky daze to find that I had been asleep in bed and it was already broad daylight. Chief Steward Cao stood at my bedside. "Your Highness, you're awake at last. Last night I saw that you were inebriated and had fallen asleep in the garden, so I had someone assist me in getting you back to your bedroom."

There was a dull, throbbing pain in my head. I wrestled my swollen eyelids open and asked, "What time is it?"

Chief Steward Cao said, "Nearly noon."

I threw back the covers. Chief Steward Cao added, "Supervisor Yun is here. He is in the front hall."

I knew very well that the reason for Yun Yu's visit was to make sure I didn't forget about the appointment at Yuehua Pavilion, and probably he would also have something to say concerning Liu Tongyi.

I got out of bed and said to Chief Steward Cao, "Instruct the kitchen to prepare the usual. Supervisor Yun might stay to eat."

Chief Steward Cao bowed. "I have already told the kitchen to prepare."

When I came to the front hall, Yun Yu was seated, quite at ease, sipping a cup of tea.

I smiled. "Supervisor Yun."

Yun Yu stood and smiled as well. "Your Highness."

I took my seat. "I rose late today. I did not know you were coming."

"No matter," said Yun Yu. "I didn't wait long anyway. I'm only afraid I have disturbed Your Highness's rest." He looked around. "The decorations in Your Highness's front hall are always changing. I see there's been a change since the day before yesterday."

"Oh?" I said. Though this was my own hall, perhaps I had been too busy over the last couple of days to note any alteration. I looked around, and it seemed the same as before. "Perhaps the servants adjusted the arrangements while cleaning. I hadn't noticed."

Yun Yu narrowed his eyes slightly. "The decorations seem to have been moved around. Has Prince Dai requested something of Your Highness again?"

With this hint, I remembered. "Prince Dai hasn't had the time these past few days. Yesterday I presented a peach-stone carving to His Majesty."

How fortunate that I hadn't forgotten about this on my return last night and had immediately had the Banquet of the Eight Immortals peach stone wrapped up and delivered to the palace before retiring to my room to drink.

Yun Yu said, "I see."

At this, I recalled that the carving had been a gift, I rather thought from Yun Yu; he'd said it was a trinket brought back from Jiangnan by a pupil of his father.

I rushed to apologize: "I presented it to His Majesty without a word to you—that was an oversight on my part. I hope you can excuse me."

There was nothing unusual about Yun Yu's expression. He smiled faintly and said, "It's nothing, only a crude marketplace bauble. I am honored that Your Highness favored it by displaying it in this hall for many years, and that it has now been presented as a gift to His Majesty. Only… if it has pleased His Majesty, I will want a favor from Your Highness."

I nodded. "Naturally, I owe you a great favor."

Because we were in the front hall, unavoidably surrounded by eyes and ears, Yun Yu only made it clear that he might come to collect on the favor at any time, then went on to discuss the handicrafts of various places in Jiangnan, then its scenery and customs. We chatted awhile, until Chief Steward Cao came to report that lunch was ready.

Yun Yu stood. "Oh, then I won't disturb Your Highness's meal. I'll excuse myself."

Smiling, I said, "Why so polite today, Supervisor Yun? Anyone would think I usually hide in my room to eat in secret. Would you like me to write you out a formal invitation right now?"

I gestured, and Yun Yu proceeded with me to the parlor where lunch was to be served. At the table, we were seated, and the dishes were laid before us, and the wine cups were filled, and at last, without any hurry, he said, "I was afraid that because I joked with Your Highness in front of Chancellor Liu at Dai Manor last night, Your Highness would be resentful and have nothing for me to eat today."

I picked up my chopsticks and said, "I have always been broad-minded, never vengeful. Besides, even if I were vengeful, I still wouldn't dare not to invite you to eat with me."

Yun Yu said, "I was judging a gentleman by my own mean standards." He lowered his voice and added, "Two days hence, at Yuehua Pavilion, I have a great gift to give Your Highness Prince Huai by way of apology."

As expected, it was all about Yuehua Pavilion.

I said, "Fine, I will be expecting it."

A few cups of wine later, Yun Yu picked up the subject once more. He said to me, "Your Highness, do you suppose that Chancellor Liu understood the true meaning behind my joke last night?"

I collected my thoughts. I wanted to suppose that Ransi had understood what Yun Yu had said yesterday, and therefore answered as he had; I wanted nothing better than to suppose that, but I didn't quite dare.

Ransi, Ransi—after all, he was no one else; he was Liu Tongyi.

Yun Yu sipped his wine. "This is Chancellor Liu we are talking about, after all. He must have discerned the truth." He raised his eyebrows. "His answer was just perfect. Isn't Your Highness overcome with delight?"

I pretended not to understand, gave a casual laugh, and steered the subject away.

When the meal ended, I invited Yun Yu to have a seat in the rear courtyard. No one was around now. We were in the gazebo above the pond, with a cool breeze blowing.

Yun Yu held back his sleeve and poured tea. I said, "I will not forget the appointment two days hence. Please set your mind at ease, Supervisor Yun."

The fragrance of the tea mingled with the breeze and rippled through the gazebo, faint and subtle.

Yun Yu said, "I am a little preoccupied today and have been long-winded. I'm afraid I have irritated Your Highness, but some words must be spoken directly at the outset. This great deed has been so many years in the making. Does Your Highness think that we have truly managed to let nothing slip?"

"Whether we have or not," I said, "I think it makes no great difference. My nephew the emperor and the empress dowager would be constantly on guard looking for an opportune moment to take me down, regardless of whether I behaved myself."

Yun Yu did not respond. I tapped my forehead with a fan and continued, "Actually, Supervisor Yun, there is something I've been meaning to ask you. It is a matter of course that *I* would do this, but why are *you* doing it?"

Yun Tang's power and influence were overwhelming, and Yun Yu, at his age, was only slightly surpassed in his position at court by Liu Tongyi. Even if I were to become emperor, father and son stood to gain hardly anything. It wouldn't have rung true for me not to voice this doubt.

Yun Yu paused, then said seriously, "Because I think that Your Highness Prince Huai is the true Son of Heaven."

"You're being facetious, Supervisor Yun," I said. "I can't even fall for Liu Tongyi without you turning it into an endless joke, and here you are suddenly so formal."

Yun Yu's expression altered again; something seemed to flash over his face and through his eyes, but his smile returned. "To be honest, it's that… Your Highness has a choice to be law-abiding or not, while I was born Yun Tang's son. Can the son of a malignant tumor be healthy flesh?"

I was silent; I could not answer this. Yun Yu continued: "Therefore, I must persist in saying too much. Your Highness, I think that some things in our lives are fixed, and all we can do is submit to fate. No good will come of wrestling with fate."

Though Yun Yu acted like he was soothing my doubts, his tone was self-mocking in the extreme. Looking at him, for some reason, I felt a bit of pity. In fact, Yun Yu was a little like me; both of us had been seen from birth as future termites in the pillars of the court regardless of the reality. My father and I were wrongly suspected, so I could raise a cry of injustice. But Yun Tang truly lived up to his reputation—or rather, lived down to it; my title of greatest tumor ought by rights to have gone to him.

Common superstition says that a person born into a wealthy household must have burned the best incense and accumulated merit in a past life.

To look at Yun Yu, this wasn't entirely accurate; it really was hard to say what kind of fortune he had accumulated to be born Yun Tang's son.

I stood and gazed into the distance outside the gazebo. I deepened my voice and smiled. "It is a little strange to hear you speak of fate. I have never bowed to it myself."

I slowly curled my left hand into a fist and pronounced the next words offhandedly, but with force behind them. "I believe that to obtain something, I need only want it."

Having said this, even I admired myself. For a dizzy instant, it seemed that I had truly extended my hand to grasp the throne.

Behind me, Yun Yu clapped twice. "My father and I, and Lord Wang, will only follow a prince with this boldness. Only this daring can truly command the empire."

I turned and repaid Yun Yu with a faint smile. "And I require aides such as Grand Tutor Yun, Lord Wang, and you, Supervisor Yun. In fact, my recent attempts to become friendly with Liu Tongyi have been to learn of the true position of those close to my nephew the emperor."

Yun Yu shook his head and said, "I am afraid it will be difficult for Your Highness to learn their true position from Liu Tongyi. I must continue to speak out of turn. That man is a difficult character. Why do you think…" Yun Yu looked directly at me. "Your Highness, why do you think Liu Tongyi is still unmarried?"

My heart tightened again.

Yun Yu's lips tipped up slightly at the corners. "The reason Liu Tongyi is unmarried is probably the same reason that I to this day remain unmarried, and that Your Highness has no children."

My heart sank.

Yun Yu spoke the truth.

The real reason I had no children wasn't that I wasn't interested in women, and the reason Yun Yu was unmarried wasn't that he was a cutsleeve. It was just that, with a wife and children, one had ties and encumbrances; if one's great undertaking failed, it would be throwing those lives away in vain.

As far as the long-standing conspiracy went, Qizhe and the empress dowager must have been aware, or if not aware, always planning to pluck out unseen dangers.

I had never wanted to think deeply about these things. Deep thought could only lead to unhappiness.

That Liu Tongyi was unmarried meant he was also engaged in preparations like these, so hardly anyone brought it up, and marriage proposals had been scarce; and Qizhe, and even the empress dowager, who loved best of all to arrange marriages, had pretended to be staying out of it. Only when the great undertaking was behind him could he consider domestic matters.

The great undertaking in his case was to pluck out the hidden danger that threatened the throne.

As chancellor, there could be no doubt that in this great undertaking, Liu Tongyi had full authority to plan and to arrange.

In his plans, in his arrangements, the matter of greatest priority, almost beyond a doubt, was how to kill me.

Yun Yu came to my side. His hands were behind his back, his gaze meaningful. "It is fortunate that Your Highness only wishes to learn the truth from Liu Tongyi. Supposing Your Highness had truly fallen in love with this man, given his disposition, it would lead to nothing but heartbreak."

Liu Tongyi, Liu Tongyi—if I were truly to revolt, and failed, there would be no shame in dying at his hands.

If I won, given his temperament…

My heart, my lungs, my spleen all squeezed together and trembled. I thought no further.

Yun Yu calmly spoke the phrase I had never wanted to saddle myself with, never wished to think beyond: "Victory or death."

I only heaved a silent sigh.

How fortunate.

How fortunate that I was only a spy.

The next day, I finally had a day to myself; no summons arrived from the palace, and no visitors came to call.

There's a quirk people sometimes have. When one is busy, one can never seem to get enough sleep; when the time comes to get out of bed, even as the servants have gone to bring washing water, one wants to snatch those moments to fall back into bed and lounge a little longer. But when I finally had a day with nothing to do and no one to disturb my pleasant dreams, I lay in bed, tossing and turning, and before it was even noon, I couldn't sleep anymore and got up on my own.

After I ate, I turned circles around the central hall on my own as an aid to digestion. I was a little lonely, so I changed into casual clothes and headed to a place where pleasure could be found.

Houses and alleys in the capital where people with my interests could go weren't in short supply, but few places catered to my rather uncommon tastes. Others usually liked the younger ones with tender voices and youthfully rounded faces; the age I preferred was a little older, but usually few of those were virgins.

Actually, I don't care about virginity, but those who weren't virgins, unless they were of great renown, did not dare keep me company, perhaps because rumor made me out to be extremely hard to please. I was helpless before this; I don't believe myself to be a fussy person. Perhaps I am a little picky about appearances. In the whole capital, only a very few can be the cream of the crop, so even in frequenting brothels, I was lonelier than others.

I came to Twilight House, where I played weiqi and drank some cups of tea with Chu Xun.

Chu Xun was a person I had gone to fairly often in the last year or two. He was handsome, skilled at conversation, even-tempered, always capable of saying just the right thing at just the right time, and never saying what ought not to be said. Even at court, these accomplishments would have made him somebody.

While I already thought well of Chu Xun, today, probably because I was a little lonely, I found him a particularly rare marvel.

Holding Chu Xun in bed, I found him increasingly to my liking. I brushed his hair, still slightly damp with fresh sweat, off his forehead, and said, half-sincere and half-teasing, "Why don't you come home with me?"

Chu Xun laughed. His voice was still a little languid. "I thought Your Highness never took anyone home."

"That was before," I said, "and it was never a rule."

I sat halfway up and looked at him. "Come back with me."

Chu Xun raised himself on one hand and picked up his inner robe to drape it over himself. "All right."

Then I really did take Chu Xun with me. After so many years frequenting pleasure houses, this was my first time bringing someone home. When I thought of this, I suddenly felt a trifle bitter.

It was afternoon still, with time to go till evening. I hadn't wanted to make too much of a spectacle coming to Twilight House, so I had taken a small sedan. When I had Chu Xun with me on the way back, it felt a little cramped. Some crowding isn't a bad thing; it has its appeal.

Chu Xun sat next to me. He had come with me right after finishing his bath. When the sedan shook slightly, his fresh aroma wafted my way.

With such a person at my side, to touch if I raised my hand, to embrace if I so wished, to answer when I spoke, I felt more present, no longer detached in the way I had felt from last night into this morning.

I took Chu Xun's hand and was just about to do something else when the sedan shook and came to a stop.

I waited briefly, then said, "What's wrong?"

An attendant keeping pace with the sedan responded, "I regret to inform Your Highness that the road ahead is blocked. I do not know why and have already sent someone to investigate."

The person he had sent returned shortly. "Imperial Chancellor Liu's official sedan is stopped ahead. It seems someone has lodged a complaint of injustice and has held up Chancellor Liu's sedan, bringing the whole street to a standstill."

I pushed aside the sedan's curtain at once. "What a thing to happen. I will go take a look."

This busy and prosperous street was quite a wide road for the capital. Many court officials had to take it on their way to and from court, and when the emperor occasionally accompanied the empress dowager out of the palace to light incense and pray to the Buddha at a temple, they often passed this way as well, precisely because the road was spacious. There was more than enough room for the emperor and the empress dowager's honor guards put together to spread without crowding.

But when I left the sedan, I saw up ahead an impenetrable sea of heads, young and old, male and female, all ordinary citizens. The whole street was hopelessly blocked, leaving no room for even a single droplet of water to squeeze by.

The crowd buzzed with commentary, which mingled with the orders from the imperial chancellor's guards for the spectators to step back from the sedan. Rising above it all were heartrending cries, likely the voices of those demanding justice.

I moved toward the crowd. Some guards from my manor went on ahead, crying, "His Highness Prince Huai passes, everyone make way!"

The noise of the spectators quieted considerably and they parted to make way.

I continued forward and saw Liu Tongyi standing in front of his official sedan. In an open space directly in front of him knelt a few unkempt, ragged people of mixed gender, crying up to heaven and earth, bitterly proclaiming their grievance.

"…Chancellor, my whole family is five souls, and we've all been dreadfully wronged… My old father remains in prison to this day, clinging to life by a thread. Please, Chancellor, take it upon yourself to investigate this injustice… Quanzhou's magistrate has no regard for human life. This transgresses against heaven's law!"

Their leader crawled a few steps forward and raised a rolled-up object high above his head. "Chancellor, this is my complaint. Please take it and get justice for my

family!"

His forehead was bleeding where he had struck it against the ground while genuflecting. Blood streamed down his filthy face, and the roll of white cloth in his raised hand was dotted with red; it must have been a declaration written in blood.

I could not help saying, "Every day, at three marks past the Hour of the Monkey, the sedan of Chamberlain Zhang Ping of the Court of Judicial Review passes through Xingzhao Street. Rather than bring your grievance here to Imperial Chancellor Liu, you would be better served by getting up and going to Xingzhao Street to stop Zhang Ping's official sedan."

The man raised his head, trembling. Liu Tongyi turned slightly and bowed. "Your Highness."

"No need for such formality, Chancellor Liu," I said hastily. "I was only passing by and came to have a look out of curiosity."

I walked over and stood beside Liu Tongyi, who said to the man, "What His Highness says is the truth. Rather than present your suit to me, you would be better off going to the Court of Judicial Review. I now know the outlines of your complaint. Once the Court of Judicial Review has accepted the case, I will keep my eye on it and urge the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review to try it conscientiously."

The man's eyes instantly became more doleful, and he said sharply, "Imperial Chancellor Liu, can you really stand by and do nothing in the face of such injustice? Are you planning to fob us off and watch as His Majesty's subjects, in this empire of law and order, are subject to the coercion of corrupt officials? Will you allow filthy officials to treat human lives like trash?!"

"It's not fobbing you off to tell you to go to the Court of Judicial Review," I said. "You ought to know that the court must proceed according to rules and regulations. Imperial Chancellor Liu undertakes a portion of the nation's rule for His Majesty. While the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review fall within his purview, he has only a supervisory role. He does not normally investigate cases himself. If Imperial Chancellor Liu were to accept your complaint now, it could only be conveyed to the Ministry of Justice tomorrow after court assembly, then transferred by the Chancellor's Office to the Court of Judicial Review for investigation. It would have to pass through the hands of numerous officials on the way, and perhaps two or three commentaries would be appended to it, and several official seals affixed. At the earliest, your case would only be filed and prepared for trial by the Court of Judicial Review the day after tomorrow, or even the day after

that. You say your father is in prison now, hanging on by a thread. A single day's delay poses a danger to him. Go now, before the Hour of the Monkey begins, and hurry to Xingzhao Street to stop Lord Zhang. He will accept your complaint, Imperial Chancellor Liu will say a word about this case to the Ministry of Justice and the Court of Judicial Review, and by tomorrow afternoon at the latest, the Court of Judicial Review will begin investigating this injustice."

The man looked blankly at me and Liu Tongyi. After a moment, he returned to kowtowing fervently. "Thank you for your advice, I will never forget this immense favor."

He raised his head slightly, looking at me in gratitude, and said, "I heard Chancellor Liu call this honorable gentleman 'Highness.' May I ask which prince His Highness is?"

What was he doing lingering here to ask about my title instead of hurrying off right away to hail Zhang Ping's sedan?

"This is His Highness Prince Huai," said Liu Tongyi.

The man gave me another blank stare. His eyes flashed, and he kowtowed fervently again. "Thank you, Your Highness Prince Huai, thank you."

The two people behind him also kowtowed.

But after kowtowing, he still didn't go. He crawled another two paces forward and raised the bloody declaration. "I will go at once to Xingzhao Street then, but please take a look at my complaint, Chancellor. I beg of you to help me get justice!"

Liu Tongyi nodded and said, "Very well." He stepped forward.

I suddenly felt suspicious. I had seen quite a few people lodge complaints of injustice. Reasonably speaking, the injustice in this case must be considerable; the people bringing the complaint were wailing quite mournfully. Despite that, they seemed a little too composed. Rather than rushing at once to Xingzhao Street, they were dawdling here, as if they weren't worried about missing their chance to stop Zhang Ping.

Could they think that because Imperial Chancellor Liu and I already knew about this case, the verdict was sure to be reversed?

Liu Tongyi had already bent to take the bloody declaration, while the man still knelt with his head bowed.

"Imperial Chancellor Liu, I've always thought that you were an honest chancellor like Lord Liu in the past—a good official."

The hand holding up the bloody declaration darted.

I sensed danger and threw myself forward without thinking. I grabbed hold of Liu Tongyi and cried, "Ransi, get back!"

In a flash, a cold gleam took aim at the left side of Liu Tongyi's chest. I only had time to reach out and shield him. A chill instantly penetrated my clothing and punctured my right arm.

Immediate chaos erupted around us. I felt nothing. I had Liu Tongyi carefully shielded, but I did not know whether he had been injured. I asked over and over, "Ransi, are you hurt? Are you in pain?"

Liu Tongyi didn't answer me. He put a hand on my right arm. "His Highness has taken an injury to his arm. Someone come and bandage it. Quick, fetch a doctor!"

There was tumult all around. I kept hold of him and said, "Ransi, for pity's sake, are you hurt?"

The parcel of blue in my arms stirred. With a soft sigh, he said, "Your Highness, I am unharmed."

At Liu Tongyi's movement, along with his answer, I slowly came to myself.

And coming to myself, I instantly noticed the impropriety of the situation. Liu Tongyi and I were so close together. I had come very close to shield him, and he now had a hand on my right arm. It was as if the two of us were openly embracing in full public view.

When I became aware of this, I felt weak from filthy, giddy joy. Then I let go and stepped back.

The servants from my manor were uncommonly adaptable and circumspect. Only now did they come to support me from either side, and Liu Tongyi removed his hand from my right arm. I looked at him closely. Though his expression was calm, there was something troubled in it.

Well, in the heat of the moment, I had inadvertently called him "Ransi" a number of times; I wondered how he felt about it.

The three who had been delivering their grievance were already bound and lay prone on the ground. My attendants had tied their arms behind their backs, though their leader thrashed and shouted, "Liu Tongyi, you collude with that treacherous Prince Huai! You are a disgrace to the name of Liu! You dishonor your family!"

Ridiculous! I eyed him and said, "I don't take this road every day. I just happened to be passing by. Were you really able to foresee that and prepare a knife in advance to lie in wait?"

The assassin thrashed again but said nothing.

"There's no need to go on pretending," I said. "There will be people waiting in the courtroom of the Ministry of Justice to hear whose orders you were acting on and why you tried to assassinate Imperial Chancellor Liu." I raised my left hand toward the guards. "Take them away."

Supporting me, one of my circumspect servants said at once, "Your Highness is so wise. How could these nobodies make mischief in front of you?"

"How can I receive such flattery in front of Chancellor Liu?" I said modestly, smiling. "It puts me to shame."

Liu Tongyi sighed softly. "Your Highness should return home as soon as possible to have your wound treated. Do not linger here joking with me. It was my carelessness that caused this. I imperiled…"

I interrupted him: "Chancellor Liu, if you really want to thank me, don't talk like that."

I had never imagined that I would have a chance to hold Liu Tongyi in my arms; now that I had lived to see the day, I thought it would be worth being stabbed another three or four times.

Liu Tongyi looked at me, and I looked back into his clear eyes. For a moment, there was an emotion in my heart that defied description. I smiled and said, "But Chancellor Liu, I think you must have been a little muddled from shock. With the dagger still in my flesh, you called for the wound to be bandaged. It can't be bandaged yet, you know."

A trace of a smile finally appeared on Liu Tongyi's face. "That's called losing your wits. I wasn't just muddled, I was completely silly."

Some of my servants had already gone ahead to call for an imperial physician, and the remaining ones supported me until I reached my sedan. Liu Tongyi kept pace with me. At the sedan, I said, "You ought to go home and rest, Chancellor Liu. I am all right. The dagger is short and only went through flesh. See, I can still move my forearm and hand. Once I am home, the doctor will pull it out, apply some salve, and bandage it. I figure it will be good as new within ten days. A mere flesh wound."

Liu Tongyi looked at my blood-soaked sleeve and frowned. "Now Your Highness is just being polite. No matter what, I must insist… That is, I would like to accompany Your Highness to Huai Manor. There can be no delay. Please get into the sedan now."

I was just about to nod and agree when an attendant moved aside the sedan's curtain, and Liu Tongyi's gaze fell upon the sedan's interior.

I stood there and watched as Liu Tongyi, his expression unperturbed, lowered his eyes.

"Chancellor Liu… I…"

Liu Tongyi lifted his sleeve. "Although, with Your Highness injured, it is inappropriate for an outsider to be present and get in the way. I will bid farewell as requested. Hurry home, Your Highness."

All I could do was nod stiffly. "Well, then I'll be going. Go home and rest as well, Chancellor Liu."

A cool breeze opened a gap in the sedan's curtains. Through the gap, I watched Liu Tongyi's official sedan disappear down another road.

This really was my first time bringing someone home from a pleasure house. In the cool breeze, I was despondent.

Not long after my return to the manor, the imperial physician arrived.

And another person, a very problematic one, came with him.

I hadn't expected him to come. What's more, he arrived without fanfare. I had just caught my breath and was half-reclining on a couch in an interior parlor, sipping tea from a cup held by Chu Xun to wet my throat. As I suffered from the terrible pain in my arm, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the attendants at the door all falling to their knees, and a flash of bright yellow appeared beyond the threshold. I automatically gave a start and rolled off the couch. I tried to land in a kneeling posture and nearly knocked the teacup out of Chu Xun's hand, straining my back in the process.

"Respectful greetings to Your Majesty."

The bright yellow crossed the threshold. "Rise, Imperial Uncle. How can you kneel when you are so gravely injured?"

I was just about to kowtow in gratitude when a hand fell on my shoulder. I had no choice but to get up. "This is too great an honor," I said.

Qizhe looked at me with a deeply troubled gaze. His hand was still on my left shoulder. "Imperial Uncle, there is no need to be so formal with us." His eyes ever so naturally wandered over to Chu Xun, who was still on the ground. "This is…"

While I considered what introduction would be appropriate, Chu Xun touched his head to the ground and said, "I am called Chu Xun. My humble greetings to Your Eternal Majesty."

With an understanding gaze, Qizhe said, "Oh. You may stand as well." He looked again at Chu Xun, who had risen. "Young Master Chu Xun of Twilight House. We have long heard your name spoken. It seems now that you are indeed an uncommon personage."

Chu Xun bowed. "My thanks for Your Eternal Majesty's praise."

Qizhe smiled, but he looked at me. "All of our imperial uncle's people are extraordinary."

I had no choice but to take this. "Your Majesty is too complimentary."

The dagger was stuck in my right arm, growing more painful by the moment. My nephew the emperor at last showed compassion for my infirmity; he drew his brows together and said to the people behind him, "Where is Imperial Physician Xu? Why the delay? Come and attend to our imperial uncle's wound!"

Nephew, the delay was your own doing; how could Imperial Physician Xu dare to come forward? How could you blame him?

Imperial Physician Xu gave a trembling answer and tottered forward with his medicine chest. My nephew the emperor at last removed his hand from my shoulder, and half a dozen of Imperial Physician Xu's subordinate medical officers crowded around. I was pressed into a chair beside a table and watched as vials, jars, knives, scissors, bandages, trays, and so on were arranged upon the table.

Imperial Physician Xu leaned down, narrowed his eyes, and studied my right arm for a long time. Looking gravely at the dagger sticking out of my flesh, he said, "The dagger in Your Highness Prince Huai's arm must be pulled out."

Obviously it had to be pulled. Any idiot would know that. Was I expected to leave it there to sprout leaves in the spring, bloom in the summer, and yield a few jin of little daggers in the fall?

And Imperial Physician Xu was the head of the Imperial Academy of Medicine. I became seriously concerned for my nephew the emperor's precious health.

Imperial Physician Xu even sounded as though he was asking for instructions.

But it wasn't me he was asking; here and now, it wasn't up to me to say whether he should pull it out or not.

Qizhe sat in the seat of honor and proclaimed: "Official Xu, go ahead and pull it out."

Upon receiving this imperial edict, Imperial Physician Xu at last rolled up his sleeves, had two of his subordinates tie a white mask over his mouth, and stood ready to pull out the knife.

He raised a small pair of scissors glinting silver, then said to me, "Your Highness Prince Huai, I will now begin extracting the dagger."

I was exasperated. I could only say, "Please go ahead."

Imperial Physician Xu held the scissors in his hand but still did not use them. "Your Highness, there will be some pain while I remove the dagger. You may feel better if you do something to distract yourself a little, for example talk to somebody."

"Focus on pulling out the dagger, Official Xu," said Qizhe. "We will talk with our imperial uncle."

Through the pain, I had to force a smile and say, "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Imperial Physician Xu began cutting my sleeve away. I continued, "It truly distresses me that this trifling affair today should have occupied Your Majesty's attention."

"Trifling?" said Qizhe. "You were so gravely injured, Imperial Uncle. It is a major affair. It is only proper for us to come in person."

The fabric around the dagger was stuck to the skin by dried blood. As it was peeled away, I felt a searing pain. I said, "Your Majesty overstates it. It is only a flesh wound."

The fabric must all have been removed. Imperial Physician Xu pressed on the skin around the dagger. With a smile hovering over his lips, Qizhe said, "You are too modest, Imperial Uncle. You are a pillar of the court. After your carousing today, you left the pleasure house to carry your beauty home, and on your way, you boldly defended Imperial Chancellor Liu from a dagger. There is nobody to rival you in wisdom, courage, or appetite."

The dagger in my flesh shifted. I clenched my teeth and gasped. "It was coincidence. Your Majesty, I believe those assassins were sent by someone. They must be investigated."

Qizhe half closed his eyes. "Fine, we will leave it to the Court of Judicial Review to handle. We have always felt comfortable leaving cases with Zhang Ping." He raised his eyes again to look at me. "Official Liu hasn't come to visit you yet, Imperial Uncle?"

"Chancellor Liu also received a shock," I said flatly. "I asked him to go home to rest."

"Yes, it is gratifying to us that Official Liu was not injured," Qizhe said. He looked at me again. "We have heard that after being stabbed, heedless of your own condition, you only held Official Liu and asked, 'Ransi, are you hurt?' You are so

intimate and friendly with this court's officials, Imperial Uncle. The whole court is one big happy family. This is immensely gratifying to us."

I suppressed a shudder. The wound in my arm was suddenly vacant.

Imperial Physician Xu had finally pulled the dagger out.

Imperial Physician Xu and his subordinates clustered around my injured arm and made use of all the vials, jars, bandages, and bowls that they had brought. They applied pressure and stopped the bleeding, cleaned the wound, drizzled this and that powder and concoction, and finally wrapped it in bandages.

I let them fiddle. I was reminded of the dish called Saiwai Jiangnan, "fertile fields abroad." The front leg of a sheep would be wrapped in lotus leaves, just like my arm now. When eaten, the lotus leaves were unwrapped, and it was sprinkled with spiced salt and dipped in a mixture of soy sauce and vinegar.

As Imperial Physician Xu bandaged, he said, "Your Highness Prince Huai's diet should be light for the next few days. Avoid spicy or stimulating foods."

I would bear that in mind.

Imperial Physician Xu delivered a clear explanation of all the vials and jars as he presented them to me, and they were taken away by Chief Steward Cao and others acting under his instructions. Slightly later, he prescribed a medicine to be taken orally. Chu Xun had stood by without a sound all along. While Chief Steward Cao was collecting the pile of vessels, Imperial Physician Xu handed over the prescription, and Chu Xun took it. Imperial Physician Xu looked at him, looked at me, then said, "Please maintain your energy in the near future, Your Highness Prince Huai, and eschew… strenuous activity."

Smiling, I said, "I have always enjoyed idleness. I will be sure to abide by Imperial Physician Xu's injunctions."

My nephew the emperor smiled as well. "Official Xu is too cautious. Our imperial uncle always knows his limits."

Imperial Physician Xu's beard quivered, and he cupped his hands in salute. "I have overstepped. My apologies, Your Highness."

"It's nothing," I said. "I will show my thanks in the future for importuning you this half-day."

Imperial Physician Xu and his subordinates genuflected and took their leave. Chief Steward Cao and Chu Xun also withdrew with the prescription and the bottles. I said to Qizhe, "I am astonished that my trifling flesh wound resulted in an imperial visitation. Your Majesty's benevolence is boundless. I am moved to tears of

gratitude. But it grows late. The hour is advanced. Please hurry back to the palace, Your Majesty."

Qizhe rose and eyed my bandaged arm. "We have given you many occasions to be distressed and moved to tears of gratitude these last few days, Imperial Uncle. Between us, as uncle and nephew, there is no need to hew so closely to the conventional formalities between ruler and subject. Your rescuing Imperial Chancellor Liu today does you credit, Imperial Uncle, and we will remember it. But there are some cautions we must pass on to you."

I bowed. Qizhe took two steps, and with a soft sigh quietly said, "Court officials of the fifth rank and above may not visit brothels and pleasure houses. We are aware that hardly anyone at court abides by these strictures, but you occupy a special position, Imperial Uncle. You have all the officials watching you from below. At any rate, you shouldn't be too public about it."

I had known that the issue of Chu Xun would cause trouble, and I immediately said, "I have spent years violating court discipline by wallowing in places of ill repute, tarnishing the court's stainless reputation. This is an unpardonable offense. I can only ask Your Majesty's forgiveness. The reason I have continued to err while knowing I did wrong is that…" I laughed bitterly. "That I wanted, just for a moment, to have someone in my bed I can talk to. I am always idle and make no contributions to the court. It always causes me shame, and on top of that, my interests being what they are, it's truly…"

Qizhe stood before me, his bright yellow hems not stirring a sliver.

A moment later, I heard him sigh again. "That is conduct befitting of you, Imperial Uncle. Even in frequenting a brothel, there is such loyalty and righteousness in your heart, such patriotism. After romancing, carousing, embracing a brothel boy, and bringing him home, still you have a bellyful of grievance and a heart full of loneliness. What are we to do?"

My legs bent at once. "I do not dare…"

But before I could kneel fully, Qizhe put a hand on my shoulder. "Imperial Uncle, we were only joking."

His brow was still furrowed, but a trace of a smile played over his lips. He withdrew his hand in no great hurry. "As you rescued Chancellor Liu today, your visit to the brothel was indeed patriotic."

My expression slipped slightly from shame, and I simply bowed my head and made no response. Neither did Qizhe speak. After a consummate silence, I finally said, "Your Majesty, it really is late now. You ought to return to the palace."

Qizhe made a noise of assent. I tried and tried to hold back, but in the end, I could not help adding, "There are also some things I must say to you, Your Majesty. Your Majesty occupies a preeminent position and ought to take tender care of your precious health. Handling affairs of state daily is a tax on your mind and your strength, and some extraneous and unimportant matters, for example my injuries or family tragedies, ought not to hold too much of your attention…"

Qizhe cut me off with a smile: "It would seem you do not like us meddling in your affairs, Imperial Uncle."

I was confounded. So, you see, it is hard work being a treacherous minister, and even worse for a loyal minister; I might give a few words of earnest and conscientious counsel, yet have untold layers of meaning read into them, uncounted evil intentions ascribed to me.

"No such thought crossed my mind," I had to say. "It was an honest remonstrance. Selfishly, I could ask for nothing better than to be the recipient of Your Majesty's tender concern. But out of consideration for Your Majesty's well-being, I must make so bold as to speak directly. When Your Majesty leaves the palace, you ought to take even greater care for your safety, as for example when proceeding to my residence with a mere smattering of guards. Supposing I really were a malicious usurper…"

Qizhe looked at me, his eyes and his expression both somewhat unreadable.

I looked directly at him with loyalty and righteousness. Shortly, Qizhe turned around and said indifferently, "Your labors are understood by us, Imperial Uncle. We will take care in the future." He shot me another glance. "That being the case, we will return to the palace. You will be at home recuperating from your wound for some days and will have no need to go to the palace. In a few days, we will send someone to look in on you."

I knelt in gratitude for this great kindness, and at last respectfully saw my nephew the emperor out.

Once His Majesty had left by the main gate, I once again felt the throbbing, burning pain from my wound, and I was somewhat exhausted. I returned to the parlor and rested on the couch. Chu Xun brought a cup of warm tea, and I pulled him down to sit next to me. Chu Xun said, "Your Highness has been injured and is greatly fatigued. Why don't I go now, so as not to cause any inconvenience or disrupt Your Highness's recovery?"

I took the teacup, drank, and said with a smile, “Even you won’t stay with me. Fine, have Chief Steward Cao arrange for a sedan to take you back, then.”

Chu Xun took the teacup from my hand. “When Your Highness puts it like that, how could I dare leave?”

Beside us, Chief Steward Cao said, “Then I will have a bedroom prepared for Young Master Chu.”

I answered, “No need.”

Chief Steward Cao said at once, “Understood.”

Chu Xun rose. “I’m sorry for troubling Chief Steward Cao.” His manner was humble and natural.

Chief Steward Cao looked up at him and said smilingly, “Not trouble at all.”

Chu Xun came back to sit beside me. I chatted with him awhile. He came from a family of officials, and he had been around quite a bit and had many experiences. He could speak on almost any subject. Each time I spoke with him, I felt easier.

Holding Chu Xun by the sleeve, I said, “What a pity I forgot that there is no zither in the manor. I’ll have to wait until tomorrow to have one brought here. Otherwise I would ask you to play for me tonight.”

Chu Xun said, “Does Your Highness want me to play out of concern that the pain from your wound will not let you sleep well?”

I made a face and said, “Do you truly think me so insensible to music? When have I ever dared to treat your playing as a lullaby, Young Master Chu?”

Smiling, Chu Xun said, “I’m only afraid that if I did play a lullaby, Your Highness would only grow more energized by listening to it.”

“That’s all to the good,” I said seriously. “Imperial Physician Xu said just now that I will need my energy.”

Chu Xun tittered. I reached out to embrace him with my uninjured left arm.

Not long after, dinner was ready. In accordance with Imperial Physician Xu’s strictures, the fare was light and bland: a bowl of plain porridge and seven or eight small dishes.

When I had just lifted my bowl of porridge and Chu Xun was serving me some cold fiddleheads in sauce, a servant said from the door, “Your Highness, Imperial Chancellor Liu and Supervisor Yun have arrived.”

My heart missed a beat. I hastily put down my bowl. “Invite them in.”

Soon after, a glimmer of pale green and a set of brocade robes appeared together at the door. I came forward. “Chancellor Liu, Supervisor Yun.”

With a bright smile, Yun Yu said, "Oh, we've come at a bad time. I smell food. Chancellor Liu, we've arrived during His Highness Prince Huai's dinner."

"You're just in time," I said. "The food has just been served, and we've yet to start eating. If Chancellor Liu and Supervisor Yun do not object, come and eat with me. I am afraid there's only plain porridge and pickled vegetables, nothing suitable for entertaining you gentlemen."

It was Yun Yu who smiled and shook his head. "What a pity. I ate before coming, and I think Chancellor Liu has eaten as well. I heard that Your Highness was injured and came over to visit. I just happened to run into Chancellor Liu at the gate."

I looked at Liu Tongyi. Perhaps it was the surpassing softness of the night, the dimness of the lamplight; I thought he was looking at me with an expression unlike his usual one. When he spoke, his voice permeated my heart like the gentle evening breeze. "How is your injury, Your Highness?"

In spite of myself, my voice also softened like the night. "It's nothing serious. The imperial physician said it would heal in a few days. Chancellor Liu… please don't worry."

Yun Yu put in, "Since Your Highness is waiting to eat, I will take…"

"It would be inhospitable to send guests away who have come to visit the infirm," I said. "Supervisor Yun and Chancellor Liu, please sit."

I called for tea. Yun Yu sipped at his, looking around. "I hear that Your Highness brought back Chu Xun?"

It was Supervisor Yun's whimsical affectation to bring up a thing best left unmentioned at a crucial moment like this.

I gave a cough and said, "Yes."

Liu Tongyi was drinking tea, staying out of it.

"Oh, then where is he?" said Yun Yu. "I lost to him last time we played weiqi, and it's bothered me ever since. If Your Highness will lend me a quiet spot, I'll play him again." Then he put down his teacup and rose. "Your Highness and Chancellor Liu can chat."

He followed Chief Steward Cao behind the screen to go see Chu Xun.

Only myself and Liu Tongyi remained, seated across from each other. I suddenly felt a little awkward.

Liu Tongyi coming to Huai Manor was a groundbreaking event, and I, like a boy of seventeen, had no idea what to do with myself.

It was Liu Tongyi who spoke first, to express his gratitude, merely thanking me for saving him, with an added expression of regret that I had been injured.

"It's nothing," I said, "I just happened to be passing by. It was all coincidence. Have the assassins been taken to the Ministry of Justice's prison already?"

Liu Tongyi nodded, and I continued, "I wonder who sent them. Have you offended anyone recently, Chancellor Liu?"

"You could say that I haven't, and you could say that I've offended too many," Liu Tongyi said. "I can't think of anyone right now."

This was the unvarnished truth. At court, there was never any knowing for sure whether one had offended somebody, or who that offended somebody was.

So I changed the subject. "At any rate, you ought to be more cautious for now, Chancellor Liu. How fortunate that those assassins were novices with no great accuracy or strength, and that they hadn't poisoned the dagger, or else…"

Guilt once again crept into Liu Tongyi's eyes, and I hastily said, "Of course, I don't say this to indebt you, Chancellor Liu."

I added, "Chancellor Liu… I… In the heat of the moment today, I inadvertently called your name, and somewhat overstepped the bounds of propriety. I hope you can make allowances…"

Liu Tongyi looked at me and did not respond.

I went on, "Because of my reputation… and certain predilections… today's actions… might impact your unsullied reputation. I hope you will…"

Liu Tongyi was still looking at me. "I have heard that Your Highness has never cared about idle gossip. Why such reserve now? Your Highness rescued me this afternoon, and Your Highness has said that all your actions were taken inadvertently in the heat of the moment, blameless and proper. If Your Highness turns around and apologizes to me, I won't know how to take it."

Oh, Ransi, the point is, when I held you, there was nothing blameless about it. I did have something else in mind.

Liu Tongyi smiled faintly. "Besides, in official circles, who can truly be truly unstained? To cling to one's reputation is to take on a meaningless burden, nothing more."

"I have always thought so," I said. "You speak to my heart there, Chancellor Liu. But I never thought you would say such a thing to me."

Those clear eyes regarded me again. I was all but struck motionless. I said, "I thought that you would have in mind affairs of state, affairs of the people. That if you even spoke to a person like me, it would be in an attempt to instill higher

values…"

Liu Tongyi smiled again. "Your Highness always leaves me speechless."

I was taken aback, not knowing what he meant, so I said, smiling, "Oh, yes, this is your first time at Huai Manor. While it is late, if you do not object, I can take you to have a look around. Huai Manor, of course, cannot equal your residence for tranquility, but the back garden is tolerable enough and quite serene at night…"

But Liu Tongyi rose. "It is getting late. I will not bother you any further. If Your Highness thinks it convenient, I can come by to visit regularly for a few days, and next time I will ask Your Highness to acquaint me with the manor's gardens."

I rose as well; his "come by to visit regularly for a few days" had brought a warm glow to my heart. I said, "Then I will see you off."

When I had seen him to the corridor, Liu Tongyi said, "Your Highness, please return to your meal. I have delayed you long enough. Your food will grow cold."

"Cold food can be heated," I said. "I will take you a little further." Thinking this was a little forthright, I added, "After all… this is your first time here."

Liu Tongyi turned in the dim night. "Your Highness, this is not my first visit."

I was again taken aback. Liu Tongyi seemed to smile again. "For your late mother's birthday celebration, I came with my mother to congratulate her. We only sat awhile, then departed. We did not stay for the banquet. Your Highness was busy then and perhaps did not notice."

The moonlight was like water, and his eyes were very bright.

I could not help saying with a sigh, "What a pity."

Liu Tongyi's smile deepened. "It is a pity. I hadn't been able to find a full edition of *The Divine White Jade Sword,* and I'd meant to ask Your Highness whether you had one here."

The moon of the past, the stars of the past, the pond of the past, the osmanthus flowers of the past—when he spoke, they took the place of the present scene and surroundings.

But I did not know whether the person standing before me was still that youth.

When Liu Tongyi was gone, I returned to the dining hall. For some reason, everything in the here and now felt a little false.

Too good, too coincidental, too convenient. None of it seemed real.

It was only when I was held up outside the dining hall by a certain person and heard him say certain words that I felt a shock of reality.

With no one around, Yun Yu gently tugged on my sleeve. He laughed softly and just as softly said, “Was Your Highness pleased with my gift?”

The suspicion caught in my mind was at last substantiated.

I might have known.

I could only sigh. In a voice even lower than his, I asked, “Supervisor Yun, is it your idea of a gift to get me stabbed?”

Chapter Four

The moment was unsuitable, so I said only this and left it there.

Though from Yun Yu's manner, it was evident he felt no remorse over getting me stabbed.

I deliberately announced before the crowd of people in the hall, "I have been slightly injured through no doing of my own. Earlier, His Majesty graced me with his presence, and I was subject to an imperial scolding. Therefore, I'm afraid I am unable to honor Supervisor Yun's invitation."

"I see," said Yun Yu. "I regret it profoundly. Oh, yes, my father meant to come ask after Your Highness's health as well but was worried Your Highness would find it inconvenient today, so sent me on ahead. Will tomorrow or the day after do?"

"Any time will do," I said. "This trifling little injury doesn't merit Grand Tutor Yun's attention."

"How can an injury to Your Highness be insignificant?" Yun Yu said with unassailable courtesy. "Lord Wang and some other notables are sure to want to come ask after Your Highness's health as well, and I expect they will not accompany my father. For the next few days, Your Highness will have no shortage of visitors. Please remember to rest and not overtax your energy on this account."

I inclined my head slightly.

Qizhe's mention earlier today of places of ill repute had not left my mind; perhaps he had only meant by it what was clear on the surface, but I could not help but try to interpret it further. Perhaps he was already aware that I was plotting with Yun Tang and Wang Qin. I didn't want complications to arise before I had drawn out all the forces of the Yun and Wang clans. So my plan had simply been to change the location of the meeting from Yuehua Pavilion to Huai Manor.

But Yun Yu had refused and made it plain that his father would not come to Huai Manor with Wang Qin. The Yun and Wang families were just as cautious as myself, only our caution was concerned with different things.

Yun Tang and Wang Qin must still have their suspicions about me. They felt safer meeting at Yuehua Pavilion, a location they had arranged, than at Huai Manor.

Here was another instance of Yun Tang and Wang Qin treating me like an idiot; everything had to be done in places they held tight in their grasp. They did not even dare to come to Huai Manor to plot. Supposing I actually wished to revolt, wouldn't I have cause to doubt their good faith?

Yun Yu looked away, and, shaking his head, said, "What a pity. When we met, I had meant to…" Halfway through, he cut himself off and lifted his sleeves to bid farewell.

I said, smiling, "Cutting yourself off like that and leaving, Supervisor Yun, is really getting your hooks into my mind. Have you some rare and exquisite individual at the ready?"

"Your Highness, how can you say such a thing with Chu Xun standing next to you?" Yun Yu said seriously.

Chu Xun ought to know that Yun Yu was only teasing; he stood next to me, smiling.

I took Chu Xun by the hand. "A-Mi is not the jealous sort."

Yun Yu raised his eyebrows. "Your Highness leaves me paralyzed with envy. I comprehend. I am in danger of overstaying my welcome if I do not leave now. I bid you farewell."

"Be well, Supervisor Yun," I said. "After what you've said, my interest in this outing can hardly be contained. As long as I am able to rouse myself, I will make it."

I had no further need to quibble overmuch on these issues with Yun Tang and Wang Qin, but Yun Yu's frame of mind was always cautious and unpredictable; perhaps he was deliberately testing me.

One way or another, I would go along with this for the moment, pending later circumstances.

Yun Yu said only one thing more: "As Your Highness pleases." Then he turned and left. I watched his figure recede into the dimness of the corridor and lifted a hand to rub my forehead.

The injury to my arm was secondary; it was handling these back-and-forths that had truly drained my energy today.

That night, I shared a bed with Chu Xun.

As I sat up in bed, I felt quite emotional. After many years of sleeping in this bed, this was the first time I had someone to share it with; what a pity that I'd had to purchase his company.

I did not know whether I would ever live to see the day when someone truly chose to sleep beside me, to share my pillow and my dreams.

In the lamplight, for a dizzy moment, looking at Chu Xun from behind in his sleeping robe, I took him for Liu Tongyi and let my mind wander.

When Chu Xun turned around, came to the bed, and lifted the covers, I came to myself with a start.

How deplorable that whenever I thought of Liu Tongyi, I became as eager as in my libidinous teens and early twenties. I tried to think of something unrelated.

Perhaps even now Liu Tongyi was thinking of how to root me out along with all my power, treacherous prince that I was.

If he, like Chu Xun, could spend a day by my side, whether he was sincere or not, even if it meant my instant death, I would be willing.

Chu Xun said softly in my ear, "Your Highness, should I put out the candle?"

I rose and extinguished it myself, then lay down under the covers.

I quietly asked Chu Xun, "Are you comfortable sleeping here, away from your own bed?"

Chu Xun said softly, "Your Highness, I can sleep anywhere. I don't mind."

I squeezed his hand under the covers. "You don't have to be so formal in bed. Call me Chengjun?"

Chu Xun was silent a moment, then quietly responded, "I wouldn't dare."

I was flooded with conflicting emotions. He was telling the truth.

I didn't ask anything else of him, only said, "Let's go to sleep."

Chu Xun made a noise of assent. He had also been telling the truth about being able to sleep anywhere. After two marks, his breathing evened out as though he were sound asleep.

He didn't move much in his sleep, nor did he hog the bed. There was stillness beside me.

Chu Xun was the son of a former official. His father had been corrupt and responsible for a number of unjust deaths. One day the truth was at last exposed, and he was summarily executed. Chu Xun had still been a child and, instead of being tattooed and sent to the frontier, was reduced to the station of slave. His older sister, Chu Luo, was reduced to a prostitute. However, she was beautiful and talented. She became one of the capital's famous courtesans and transferred to the well-known Daylight House. Chu Xun had been a laborer at the examination center, working bitterly hard, washing the floors and cleaning the latrines, even getting

beaten black and blue for listening in on lectures and sneaking books to read. So Chu Luo paid off a patron and the madam so they would help her get Chu Xun into Daylight House as a musician. He was quick-witted and could pick up a seasonal tune after hearing it once, and could even compose a song or two of his own. Gradually his reputation grew. All the prostitutes in the capital's brothels could be proud to sing a song Chu Xun had written for them, and many fresh faces came by to listen to his songs.

The first time I went, I was dragged along by Qili, Qizheng, and some other nephews. They were very mysterious about it and insisted on pretending to be commoners when we went. When the sedan reached the door, I looked up and saw the name of Daylight House, and said at once, "Your imperial uncle has no business in this place. You two go off and enjoy yourselves while I go over to Twilight House next door. When you're through, send someone next door to notify me."

Daylight House and Twilight House were the same business, only one offered girls, and the other boys.

Qili said, "Do you think your nephews would invite you without consulting your preferences, Imperial Uncle? We've come to Daylight House today expressly so you can listen to the zither. The musician is the younger brother of the greatest beauty in the capital. Though in your eyes, Imperial Uncle, perhaps *he* is the capital's greatest beauty."

My interest was piqued. When we entered Daylight House and saw Chu Xun, I did think he was quite handsome. His age and appearance both suited my tastes perfectly. He was not yet as skilled in dealing with people then as now; with his smattering of fame, he was a little proud. He wouldn't even see an ordinary guest. Though Qili, Qizheng, and the others had dressed up in commoner's clothes, it was clear at a glance to the discerning eye that their backgrounds were out of the ordinary; they couldn't even fool a slave. On the strength of my nephews' grandiosity, we entered the best private room together. Tea was brought and poured by remarkably deferential attendants who stooped and bowed. Qili and the others noticed that something wasn't right, but they lacked self-awareness. They even complained to me: "Maybe you come by too often on your way to Twilight House. They recognize you." They were so green I couldn't be bothered to enlighten them.

Chu Xun delayed his arrival until we had finished drinking a cup of tea. He brought his zither and played a rather rarefied piece, giving the room a feeling of remoteness. Chu Luo herself kept us company, coming over to pour tea. Chu Xun played well, but this refined sort of music, even played by the best of the best

musicians, just wasn't suitable for listening to in a brothel. I felt dull and unsatisfied, and began to drowse, only holding on to my last shred of wakefulness by admiring his face. My nephews could look to Chu Luo to keep their attention. When Chu Xun finished the song, he prepared to launch into the next one with a lofty look. I raised a hand to stop him and asked if we could hear a lighter tune instead.

Chu Xun gave me a look of disdain, convinced that I lacked the taste to appreciate sophisticated music. Chu Luo hastily smoothed it over, telling Chu Xun to play a popular tune, while she sang and danced in accompaniment for part of it. Finally the room livened up.

"That was a nice song. Did you write it?" I asked Chu Xun.

"Yes," said Chu Xun. "It is merely a vulgar melody." He seemed quite dissatisfied with his own composition, as if he thought a popular song could not appropriately display his talent and refinement.

I could not stand to see such a beautiful youth progress further and further along the path of no return to cynicism, so I said, "The vulgarity or elegance of a melody is only a matter of opinion. As long as many people enjoy listening to it, music is good. So-called vulgar music is actually easier and more natural. Why exert yourself in deliberate pursuit of elegance? Take many of the verses in *The Classic of Poetry*, for example: in their day they might have been called the height of vulgarity, but to posterity, they are the height of elegance."

I told him that actually these ditties were more suitable for him; he played them much better than the elegant songs.

Chu Xun bowed his head and said he understood, but the light in his eyes and the expression on his face were in direct opposition to his words. It appeared that he took immense exception to my comments.

Chu Luo continued her solicitous attentions toward my nephews. Qili had given her instructions beforehand, so she didn't come bother me. Chu Luo and Chu Xun must have both guessed the reason behind this, and perhaps my admiration for Chu Xun's appearance was a trifle naked: under my notice, Chu Xun's expression became increasingly stiff and uncomfortable, and Chu Luo snuck occasional glances at me and her little brother with concern in her eyes.

While Chu Luo and Chu Xun were performing together on zither and flute, Qizheng asked me in a whisper, "What do you think of the musician, Uncle?"

"Pretty good, but he puts on airs," I said.

Qizheng said, smiling, "Many people think that it's the airs that make him interesting."

Chu Xun's so-called fame must have rested half on his musical talent and half on his appearance. Many of the people who came to hear him play must have shared my interests.

"I think he would be better with less pretension," I said. "And I don't suppose he'll keep it up for long."

Though our discussion was held in hushed tones, Chu Luo and Chu Xun must still have caught the gist. When the song ended, Chu Xun, holding his zither, excused himself with no expression on his face, and Chu Luo asked that her little brother be dismissed.

Qili, holding his wine cup, said, "It's for my uncle to say whether he can leave. The rest of us have no say in it." With a smile, he said to me, "Uncle, can he leave?"

Chu Xun's expression stiffened further. Chu Luo had begun to tremble.

Did I really look like a ruffian who would force myself on a humble man?

Even after I nodded and waved my hand to send Chu Xun away, his expression remained stiff, and Chu Luo continued to tremble slightly.

Not long after these events, I forgot all about them until some months later, when Qili said to me, *Do you still remember that zither player Chu Xun from Daylight House?* and I recalled him. Qili said, *You really do have an eye for people, Imperial Uncle. The young musician hasn't been able to keep up his airs. He has gone to Twilight House and will be receiving clients tonight.*

As a musician, Chu Xun had attracted quite a number of people who shared my interests. Among them one or two could no longer hold back. Chu Luo was getting older, already into her twenties, no longer a slim and elegant girl in her teens. Her position as lead courtesan was slipping away as her reliable patrons diminished daily. She already had difficulty protecting herself, and certainly she could no longer protect him. Then she contracted a grave illness, and Chu Xun went straight to Twilight House.

But there was something lamentable about this reversal. The youth Chu Xun, though lacking in social graces, had an appearance and clarity of spirit that I liked. When I heard that he had really entered Twilight House and would be receiving clients that night, and Qili asked whether I was interested, I went.

On the first night a prostitute receives clients, as a rule, the first encounter will be publicly auctioned off. I sat in a small room on the second floor, watching the commotion downstairs. Chu Xun was eighteen or nineteen, a little old to be joining a brothel, but judging from this spectacle, for a year or two at least, he would certainly be at the peak of popularity.

As I was spectating, before I could decide whether to bid, a noise came from the little door at the back of the room through which tea was brought in, and a person came around from behind the screen blocking the door. He fell to his knees: it was Chu Xun.

He prostrated himself on the ground. "I beg Your Highness to be merciful and bid on me. I will do my utmost to serve Your Highness."

In the months since I had seen him, he had progressed greatly. He had figured out how to use connections, and had come to entreat me.

Chu Xun must have been schooled by recent experiences. He had probably offended some thorny individual and been forced to enter Twilight House; now he was forced to come to me to avoid that person.

"Why have you come to me?" I asked. "And who are you trying to avoid?"

Chu Xun hung his head and spat out the words: "Lord He."

No wonder he had come to me. His Lord He must have been He Yue, an older cousin of the empress dowager in his sixties who styled himself the Haitang Hermit. This self-proclaimed romantic of an old haitang tree was in fact very… romantic.

My feelings about this were a touch complicated.

Chu Xun had come to me because he considered me some improvement on He Yue.

But to be some improvement on He Yue was not cause to celebrate.

Yet my heart softened, and I agreed. Beside me, Qili sighed and said, "Imperial Uncle, you really are moved by the plight of beauty."

When I placed a bid, naturally no one dared to fight me for it. So I became Chu Xun's first client, which came with nearly enough ostentation to equal the pomp of the bridal chamber.

I had thought that Chu Xun, working in a brothel with his dash of scholarly temperament, would surely put up an insufferable act of being under compulsion at first, so I deliberately ordered wine for the room to liven things up.

Instead, contrary to expectations, Chu Xun held back his sleeve and poured wine for me. He urged me to drink, his manner natural and familiar, his voice easy. It was a great surprise to me.

"You're an entirely different person from who you were some months ago," I said.

Chu Xun threw back his head and downed the wine in his cup in one gulp. Smiling, he said, "Your Highness gave me a hint then, but I was frivolous and did not know myself. Now I have thoroughly grasped the meaning of self-awareness.

When I think of myself before, it makes me want to laugh." Then he poured himself another cup and lifted it. "Thank you for your magnanimity that day, Your Highness."

When we went to bed, Chu Xun was obliging and agreeable. While admittedly a touch inept, there was no bashfulness or posturing. I enjoyed myself immensely. The night was worth the cost, surpassing my expectations.

Though that first night had been a favor, Chu Xun later improved, and I gradually came to see him more and more often. Now, the Young Master Chu Xun sleeping beside me was a polished piece of jade, smooth and supple, a different person altogether from the lofty young musician.

You could say that need had brought Chu Xun and me together. Chu Xun needed a major patron at Twilight House, and I, in my loneliness, wanted to have someone understanding to go to. Only, now that Yun Tang and Wang Qin's rebellion was on the cusp of the crucial moment, it was yet unsettled whether I would succeed in my capacity as spy. Yun Yu regularly went out on the town with me, and he was well acquainted with Chu Xun and knew his situation like the back of his hand. Chu Xun was innocent; supposing he was dragged into this?

Moved by nothing more than fleeting sentimentality, I had brought Chu Xun home. Thinking about it now, it really had been inappropriate. But sending him back now wouldn't be especially appropriate either. When the Yuehua Pavilion affair was over, I would rethink the matter.

As for that appointment at Yuehua Pavilion, I did end up going.

Though my imperial nephew had ordered me not to visit pleasure houses in full public view, Yuehua Pavilion was not that kind of place.

Yuehua Pavilion was a restaurant, the most famous in the capital. Its food wasn't the best; often a large plate containing only a heap of shredded greens garnished with two or three decoratively carved pieces of gourd was brought to the table under an elegant name representing itself as a dish. But the plate that this dish was served on was unmistakably the capital's most modish, and most expensive.

And Yuehua Pavilion was different from an ordinary restaurant. It did not do its business right out on the street. In the most central location of the capital's most flourishing pleasure street, it had encircled a patch of land with a compound. Surrounded by high walls ornamented by a big red gate, it had the look of a private mansion. The inside was also laid out like an ordinary mansion, with all the requisite inner and outer courtyards, gazebos, rockeries, ponds, trellises, and so on.

The main hall was where guests were received. There were only private tables; ordinary customers were not welcome. Each private area stood apart, and each one was different; the arrangements inside them suited the scenery of the seasons: spring and summer, autumn and winter. There were curtains of willow branches trailing in spring and bamboo mats covering the floor in summer; in autumn, the fruits of the harvest were on display, and in winter the scene was of fur mattresses and narcissus and freshly picked wintersweet, along with a clay stove that warmed good Huadiao wine.

Moreover, the treatment guests received at Yuehua Pavilion was different from a regular restaurant. Clean, comfortable rooms were provided for bathing; if you enjoyed your meal too much and didn't want to leave, quite presentable couches were supplied for rest; if in the course of eating, bathing, and sleeping, you felt lonely, gentle and lovely ladies or handsome and exquisite youths were always on hand to keep you company…

My first time at Yuehua Pavilion, I had been brought by Yun Yu, and he had been very moved, saying with a sigh that in this place I would experience what it felt like to leave the profane world and step into the vastness of the universe.

To tell the truth, I did not feel that. Simply put, Yuehua Pavilion was a place that traded on elegance encumbered by a restaurant and a pleasure house. It was restrained, roundabout; I liked to be direct about both drinking and whoring, so it didn't suit me.

But I still nodded and praised its fashionableness.

All I took from the experience was the sudden understanding that Yun Yu was actually very poetic.

Regardless, I still enjoyed myself quite thoroughly. My strongest impression was of the Huadiao wine Yun Yu had warmed, the memory of which I kept with me to this day.

Sadly, it was now nearly summer and no time to drink warm wine. In addition, my arm had yet to heal, so I had to abstain.

Therefore, at the table I ate only a bit of plain food and took one cup of wine to moisten my mouth and raise my spirits slightly.

At this meal, Yun Tang, Wang Qin, and I, the three great tumors, sat together, and Yun Tang and Wang Qin had each brought along a little tumor of his own, making a perfect contrast, a brilliant sight. This unavoidably gave me a lasting feeling of poignancy.

This meeting today was for the purpose of deciding the time to act, to seize the throne, to imprison or kill Qizhe.

"What time will suit Your Highness Prince Huai?" Yun Tang asked me.

"Any time," I said.

Yun Tang and Wang Qin still had business to attend to in a few areas; balancing the relative merits and shortcomings, the date was settled for the fifteenth of the fifth month.

Counting it up, I had been part of the conspiracy for several years. About a month from now, there would at last be an end to it.

When I rose from the table to visit the latrine, after leaving the room, I couldn't help feeling another bout of sentiment.

During my years of participation, I had contributed to all their plans and strategies. Supposing the emperor or the empress dowager really did become aware of it and the whole thing went up in flames, had I a hundred thousand mouths, I would be unable to talk my way out of assuming guilt.

I stood beside a rock in an open space. I heard Yun Yu's voice say, "Why is Your Highness standing here instead of returning to the table?"

"I thought the scenery was lovely and couldn't resist pausing to look," I said.

Yun Yu smiled and came to stand beside me. He said nothing further. In the warm shades of late spring, he resembled a painting of infinite grace.

On the subject of Yun Yu, I had always felt some qualms, which, combined with guilt, had formed an indescribable tangle.

Yun Yu and Wang Xuan were roughly of an age with my imperial nephews, and they had both been friendly with them in the past. Their familiarity with me had all come after I had joined the conspiracy.

Perhaps because of Yun Yu's facility in social interactions, his father, Yun Tang, had given him an assignment; in recent years, he had grown closer to me. Leaving aside the conspiracy and his background, Yun Yu was in fact delightful company, with some interests that dovetailed perfectly with mine, so I had gradually been going around with him more and more often, and he came regularly to Huai Manor. It was precisely this that had caused rumors to sprout up.

Yun Yu was the most remarkable among the aristocratic scions and the court's young officials both. Admittedly, he was Yun Tang's son, but in erudition, experience, craft, ability, and so on, he did indeed surpass others; someone like Wang Xuan was clearly inferior. But perhaps he was too young and self-satisfied. A display of his abilities unavoidably made others say that he was sly and

sophisticated, when in reality he was still too easygoing, and nowhere near Liu Tongyi in terms of conduct. Therefore, though Liu Tongyi wasn't much older than him, at court he surpassed Yun Yu considerably on every front.

Had there been no conspiracy, Yun Yu would certainly have been a future pillar of the court. But a month from now, when the rebellion was revealed, Yun Yu might not even make it out with his life.

I was often thrown into melancholy, sighing at the thought that Liu Tongyi might well be thinking of how to get rid of me. Whether he really did want to eliminate me, I could not know for sure, but each and every one of my own actions was indeed another step toward Yun Yu's death. Who was I to wallow in self-pity?

Fortunately, I could guess that, should the rebellion succeed, Yun Tang, Wang Qin, and the rest would certainly act in concert to do away with me, leaving their two sides in opposition; or perhaps they would borrow my strength to get rid of one side, then turn around and dispose of me. So even now Yun Yu's every action might be a step in a plot against my life. That thought made me feel easier.

Many things could not be considered in detail. The more one considered them, the more they chilled the heart.

Taking the current situation as a whole, Yun Tang and Wang Qin wanted to seize the throne and kill Qizhe. In order to demonstrate my loyalty, to defend the Jing family's empire and Qizhe's throne, I was a spy inside the conspiracy, seeking the deaths of Yun Tang and the others. The empress dowager, Qizhe, Liu Tongyi, and the court's honest officials thought that I was of a kind with Yun Tang and Wang Qin, so they wanted to kill me. Then the Yun and Wang factions both wanted to eliminate me, and even more to eliminate each other once the rebellion was a fait accompli.

Circles within circles, every person a knife, and each also the fish on the slab.

I still remembered when I had first become Yun Tang and Wang Qin's co-conspirator. During a discussion one day, Yun Tang had pointed to Yun Yu beside him and said, "This is my unworthy son Yun Yu, who made his first entry into court not long ago. I hope Your Highness Prince Huai might instruct him in the future."

Yun Yu rose, bowed to me, and smiled. Though we had been acquainted before, it was only from that day forth that we really became familiar.

I had never taken notice before, but now I realized that while he didn't seem to have changed at all in the interim, he had actually changed quite a bit. Of course, so had I. When I had first become a spy, I had been coasting on a swell of pure hot

blood. Now that the great work was on the point of fulfillment, my blood had cooled, and I was conscious of the passage of time.

I couldn't help but sigh. Yun Yu looked at me with his eyebrows raised, still saying nothing.

"This moment and scene make me wistful," I said. "Life is always changing. When a moment is gone, there is no bringing back the time that has passed. And at this moment, we cannot bring back the mood of the past."

Yun Yu's lips tipped up slightly. Finally he said, "Your Highness, when the wish of many years is on the point of being fulfilled, why are you melancholy?"

Since I was already feeling wistful, I might as well do it fully. "It is precisely because of this that I cannot help feeling melancholy." I looked ahead of me at the swaying canopies of the trees. "Supervisor Yun, if you were not Grand Tutor Yun's son, would you still be taking part in this?"

Yun Yu turned his head to look at me and said, "What? Does Your Highness mean to ask whether it is only because of my father that I follow you?"

"No," I said. "Act for the moment as though I were not Prince Huai, only Jing Weiyi, and I will only see you as Yun Yu."

"In that case," said Yun Yu, "I can only answer with three words: I don't know." He turned his head and looked into the distance as well. "I don't normally think of such things. There's too much in front of me to think about already. Why concern myself with nonexistent phantasms? Although—"

Yun Yu turned back and glanced at me with his brow furrowed. "Can Your Highness still be hung up on Liu Tongyi? Is that the cause of your wistfulness?"

I froze, then said, "Why would you say such a thing? That has nothing to do with it."

With his hands behind his back, Yun Yu said, "To speak freely, there is really no need for Your Highness to trouble yourself overmuch. The situation is what it is. Our positions have changed. It is outside of our control. I think that, between us on one hand, and the emperor, the empress dowager, Liu Tongyi, and the honest officials on the other, it cannot be said who is more righteous. The victor is king, the loser is an outlaw—that is the sole genuine principle in this world. If we succeed, we are right. If we fail, we are traitors. Though His Majesty is Your Highness's nephew and the present emperor, if he wishes to be rid of us, why can we not wish to be rid of him?"

He spoke so directly that it made me break out in sweat to hear him. There was sense in everything he said, but to say it so openly, he must have had no fear of being overheard.

I turned the subject away. "Don't worry. Even if I were still hung up on Liu Tongyi, that would not cause me to disrupt our deployments. Now that you've brought up Chancellor Liu," I said, raising my hand to touch the wound on my arm, "I will say that your gift is truly a little hard to stomach, Supervisor Yun."

Yun Yu smiled. "I was just looking for a suitable time to explain that to Your Highness. It was a mistake on my part that caused Your Highness to be injured. My original plan did not include that. Your Highness's wound was unintentional."

According to Yun Yu, he hadn't known I would take that road that day. He had previously arranged for the people reporting their grievance to be there, intending that they would stop the sedan, then stab Liu Tongyi. An assassination attempt on the imperial chancellor was no small matter; it would have necessitated a serious investigation. If I had taken the opportunity to volunteer myself to the emperor, perhaps I could have taken over supervision of the case. This way, I would have been in and out of the imperial chancellor's residence to check in on him, deepening our relationship.

Narrowing his eyes, Yun Yu said, "When the plan was about to be carried out that day, I was sitting in a tea shop. I happened to see Your Highness's sedan enter Twilight House. Considering the time, I guessed that you might run into the action, so I instructed those people to act as they saw expedient, and to stab Chancellor Liu or Your Highness as the chance presented itself. I didn't think it would turn out to be such a success, with Your Highness boldly rescuing Chancellor Liu." With an expression that seemed very moved, Yun Yu said, "I suppose it was destiny!"

I'd have to be an idiot to take it for destiny.

When it came to Yun Yu, I really had no idea what to do.

Yun Yu smiled. He was outwardly apologetic but had self-satisfaction written all over his face. I only said, "Thank you for thinking of me, Supervisor Yun. I do not know whom you might love in the future, nor what kind of person they will be. I think that perhaps they will not have an easy time."

Yun Yu's expression instantly stilled. Then, smiling again, he said, "Why?"

"Your idea of a gift is to stab a person," I said. "From this I infer that if you fell in love, you might prick that person as full of holes as a honeycomb."

Granted that I was joking, this was also the truth. Yun Yu sometimes went overboard. If he married one day, and his wife dared to look at another man, or give

him an extra smile, or an excess word, perhaps it would provoke Yun Yu into a rage, and he would stab her a few dozen times.

Yun Yu laughed. "So that's how Your Highness sees me." Something was off about his tone. I realized that his expression had changed greatly, and his smile had morphed into a sneer.

I was a little astonished. Yun Yu suppressed his sneer and said calmly, "Your Highness's injury was indeed an error on my part. I took only a brief interest in the matter of Chancellor Liu, but I have given offense. I hope Your Highness will be magnanimous and make allowances for my shortcomings." With a flick of his sleeve, he turned and left.

I was even more bewildered. Yun Yu had always been able to take a joke, and he had never spoken with such an attitude. Why would he suddenly act like this?

Could it be that something I'd said had inadvertently prodded some secret hurt of his?

Not long after I returned to the table, Yun Tang and Wang Qin went their separate ways. Yun Yu accompanied his father, and I left after them.

Yun Yu had by now resumed his usual manner, as if our conversation in the open space had never happened. I treated it as if it had not happened as well, letting it go.

When I returned home and had just sat down, someone came to announce that Imperial Chancellor Liu had come to visit.

Liu Tongyi was here. What had he come for?

Maybe he thought it would be proper to come regularly to check on the condition of my injury.

Maybe he had learned of me going to Yuehua Pavilion and was coming to investigate.

At any rate, he couldn't be coming because he missed me. But despite that, I couldn't resist being glad for his visit.

I went forward to receive him and took him to sit in the waterside pavilion in the rear courtyard.

This pavilion was on the lake, with a floating walkway linking it to the shore. When renovating it, I had given particular instructions for some extra bends to be added to the floating walkway, so it zigzagged over the water, looking artistic from a distance.

It might be said that in all of Huai Manor, this pavilion best demonstrated my elegance.

So I led Liu Tongyi through one courtyard after another, and even when several times on the way, he had politely said, "Your Highness, we can sit anywhere at all," I persisted; it had to be the waterside pavilion.

After about one mark, we finally reached the entrance to the floating walkway beside Four Seasons Lake. I said modestly to Liu Tongyi, "I personally oversaw the construction of the waterside pavilion and the floating walkway. Every time I come to the pavilion, I feel as if my heart has escaped the mundane and become like the water, like the wind touching the sky."

"Yes," Liu Tongyi said positively. "Listening to Your Highness, I also feel as though I am floating, leaving the mundane." Receiving his confirmation, my pleasure was heartfelt.

As we followed the floating walkway and came to a small gazebo midway, I put my hand on Liu Tongyi's shoulder and stopped. Liu Tongyi stood still as well, looking a little startled. I smiled faintly at him and rotated a stone crane beside a support beam in a half circle. The floating walkway that had been connected to the land retracted, accompanied by the clank of machinery, breaking contact with the lakeshore.

As expected, surprise and inquiry appeared in Liu Tongyi's expression. Modest again, I said, "This retractable walkway is also something I thought of and brought in a craftsman to make." I looked out on the mirrorlike surface of the lake. "Because I am often sunk too deeply in the mundane, retracting the walkway makes my heart feel more thoroughly divorced from the noise of the world."

Liu Tongyi looked at me, and the corners of his lips twitched. He said, "Your Highness truly is a man free of earthly concerns."

I stared at him and said earnestly, "No, I am a vulgar man. I often strive to improve."

Liu Tongyi's lips moved again. Also very earnest, he looked at me and said, "Your Highness, I think you are already far enough removed from the vulgar as it is."

I held back my undulating emotions. "Chancellor Liu, do you mean that sincerely?"

Liu Tongyi smiled and nodded. "I do."

At this moment, I could not suppress the surging torrent in my heart. Unable to help myself, I said, "I find that at a time like this, my thoughts can find an echo in yours. I wonder if I might occasionally call you Ransi."

I had recited the name Ransi in my heart as many times as there were stars in the sky. But it was only on the current strength of my emotions that I could ask this

question.

Liu Tongyi froze, then smiled again. "If Your Highness is willing to address me that way, then I am inexpressibly honored." His hair wasn't fully bound up today, and his figure in its thin jade-green robe seemed ready to dissolve amidst the blue-green of the lake.

These were the most apparent of formulaic pleasantries. I took them to mean he really did consent, so I called out, "Ransi."

Liu Tongyi was still smiling. "Your Highness."

I led Liu Tongyi into the pavilion.

The waterside pavilion had only five or six rooms. Apart from the two rear corners, where a washroom and latrine were fully partitioned off, the rest of the rooms opened onto each other, spacious and bright, with only screens, bead curtains, or carved wooden shelves making an incomplete partition. I took Liu Tongyi around to have a look at everything, and then we sat on either side of a small table behind a curtain of crystal. I took up the tea set on the table and made tea.

Liu Tongyi lent a hand. "I was just wondering how tea would be brought once the floating walkway leading to the shore was retracted. It turns out this has been arranged."

"I often spend time here," I said, "so all kinds of things are fully prepared."

Actually, apart from when I wanted to cool off in summer, I didn't come here much. The princess had liked this place very much and often came to it as a retreat. This way she wouldn't see me, and if she sighed, played the zither, recited poetry, or cried, I wouldn't know about it; both sides had peace. I suspected that this was where she'd had clandestine meetings with the guard. Perhaps her child had been conceived on the bed here.

As such, all the furnishings in the waterside pavilion had been swapped out over the last few days and smelled brand new. I hoped Liu Tongyi wouldn't notice.

The tea leaves, tea set, water, mixed fruits, pastries, and so on, were also all present because I had instructed Chief Steward Cao to prepare them at once while I went to receive Liu Tongyi.

Liu Tongyi added tea leaves to the pot. "While this place is tranquil, it is built on the water and is very damp. Your Highness's wound has not yet healed. You ought to rest in drier retiring rooms for the time being."

"Yes," I lamented, "with this injury, I must temporarily be more vulgar."

Liu Tongyi's hand paused as he held a silver scoop of tea leaves. He said nothing.

As the steam coiled, the room filled with the aroma of tea. I said, "Ransi, it is very good of you to go out of your way to come see me so often."

"I caused Your Highness to be injured," said Liu Tongyi. "If Your Highness says such a thing again, I will not be able to endure it."

Pouring the tea, I said, "You came at a lucky time today, Ransi. I had just returned from Yuehua Pavilion. If I had been one mark later, I might have missed you."

"There is no coincidence about that," said Liu Tongyi. "I knew Your Highness had gone to Yuehua Pavilion today." Holding up his teacup, he turned his head to look at me. "I thought that Your Highness would be back by now, so I came over. No luck involved."

My hand paused. I put my teacup on the table. "You speak candidly, beyond my expectations. You are always so polite and formal with me, I had thought that it would be near impossible to hear you speak from the heart."

Ransi had spoken openly to me of Yuehua Pavilion. What did he mean by it? I felt a myriad of emotions when he said this, yet all of them left me bereft.

"Because Your Highness speaks candidly, if I continued to conceal and evade, it would be too pompous of me." He smiled, then put down his teacup. "Every word Your Highness spoke earlier had poetry underlying it. Each phrase floated in the ether, perfectly refined. I am a truly vulgar person. I do not know how best to address Your Highness when you are so refined. This is all I can manage."

I froze amid the refined steam rising from the tea, a little bewildered. "Well, Ransi… I… I think that… you…"

Liu Tongyi leaned against the table, frowning slightly. "Actually, I have never understood Your Highness's attitude. When Your Highness speaks to others, it isn't like this, but as soon as you speak to me, you immediately seem to become a different person. Therefore, my manner in front of Your Highness has always been fearful, my speech carefully considered and affected."

I was frozen for a long time, then finally put my hand to my forehead and let out a lengthy sigh. "Of course I can't fool you. The difference between a put-on act and true elegance is apparent."

It was as if a hammer had smashed my misty dream. I couldn't help saying with a smile, "Actually, it costs me a great deal of effort to talk like that. If I'd known you suffered so much to hear it, I wouldn't have suffered so much myself."

The mist dispersed, the clouds parted. It turned out that it was I, and not Liu Tongyi, who had been up in the air all this time.

"Thank you for being direct today, Chancellor Liu," I said. "I don't know how long I would have gone on like that otherwise. I'll tell you the truth. I don't often come to this waterside pavilion. I've gone out of my way to receive you here so I could put up a front. It's true that I oversaw the construction of the pavilion, but it was only renovated, not rebuilt."

Liu Tongyi raised his eyebrows. I said, "This place was built by my father. He called it the diligence room. When I was little, he would lock me up in here every day to study. The mechanism for retracting the bridge used to be operated from the shore, not from this end. He would retract the bridge, and all I could do was sit here and behave myself. It was just like being in a water prison. Even after it was renovated, I still feel a little nervous here."

Smiling, Liu Tongyi said, "So that's it. No wonder those bookshelves over there are filled with things like *Throne of the Gods* and *A Hero in Troubled Times.*"

"So that's what gave me away," I said with a bitter smile. "How embarrassing."

I looked at Liu Tongyi. "Ransi, since we have discarded the formalities and the posturing, I want to ask you, what do you think… of me as a person? At court everyone says that I am the court's greatest malignant tumor, a power-hungry, treacherous prince, a troublemaker at heart. What do you think?"

I fixed my gaze upon him. Liu Tongyi's expression was calm. "A person might not even have a clear idea of what kind of a person he is himself. How could outsiders pronounce an accurate judgment? Treachery or loyalty are only standpoints. People in different positions have different views. Nothing in the world is absolute."

"And you, Ransi," I said, "what do you think my standpoint is?"

Liu Tongyi did not answer.

I looked at the surface of the lake outside the waterside pavilion. "Let me speak a little plainer today. It gratifies me very much that you didn't answer just now, because you didn't speak a falsehood in front of me. I often wonder, if I weren't Prince Huai and you weren't Liu Tongyi, would we at least be able to be good friends? If I did not have the title of Prince Huai, I really would only want to be a carefree idler. If you did not have to be imperial chancellor, what would you want to do, Chancellor Liu?"

"Well," said Liu Tongyi, "I suppose I would also want to be an idler wandering all over the world. Idleness truly is the rarest of things."

I stood. “Rare it is. There are so many things outside of one’s control. For example, I am currently doing something, and I do not know whether it is right or wrong.”

Liu Tongyi walked over beside me. “I think everyone must encounter situations in which right and wrong are hard to determine. There is something I want to say to Your Highness, though I don’t know whether it is right or wrong. While Your Highness’s injury has yet to heal, you should not go to places like Yuehua Pavilion.”

I turned and stared at Liu Tongyi, then finally managed to ask, “Ransi, as far as my injury goes, do you suspect that I actually arranged it on purpose? So that I… could get close to you.”

Liu Tongyi looked back at me, his expression and his eyes still as calm as water. “I had not thought of that. Your Highness did no such thing.”

I thought that if Yun Yu had sent a hundred people to brandish their knives and stab me as full of holes as a honeycomb, it would have been worth it to hear this.

Pressing on, I asked, “Well, would you think that I might have ulterior motives for getting close to you?”

Liu Tongyi’s expression stiffened. With a bitter smile, I said, “Don’t answer that.”

And he did not speak. Only, after a moment, and then another moment, I heard a soft sigh.

A hundred thousand emotions surged restlessly in my heart. In spite of myself, I said, “Whether you believe it or not, in everything I say to you, everything I do for you, there is never any ulterior motive.”

Having said it, I was the first to think it ridiculous. “No, that’s wrong. I ought to say that I have nothing but ulterior motives.”

I met Liu Tongyi’s eyes as they turned on me. “Ransi, actually, I love you.”

Immediately after, I added, “I only wanted to tell you. You don’t need to answer.” I had a fairly good idea of how Ransi would answer me.

Liu Tongyi stared at me. Suddenly, his expression seemed a little lost. After a moment, he said, “I see.”

It was a surprise to me that I had said it. And just as well that I had. Perhaps saying it now was for the best. Heaven, or I myself, had finally given me an opportunity. I had thought that I would never live to say it, and having said it, I became increasingly forthright.

I said point-blank, “There’s no need to worry, Chancellor Liu. I’m only saying this because for once I felt like telling the whole truth. I know you are an honorable

man, and cutsleeve tendencies are nothing to flaunt. I'm sure that my saying these things to you will make you unhappy. I really am very sorry. I don't know myself why I should love you, but I've never been able to let it go. I already regret telling you. Once you leave here, Ransi, just forget everything that happened here today. If you distance yourself from me now and don't come visit again, it would be completely understandable."

I had kept my eyes on the surface of the lake outside as I spoke. When I was finished, I was still looking at the water, and kept looking.

Beside me, Liu Tongyi appeared quite calm. My heart hung suspended, waiting, waiting. A long moment later, I heard him speak again. He said, "I see."

Then once again there was nothing.

I couldn't resist looking at him. He was also looking at me.

I resisted, resisted to the point that I could resist no more. I said, "Ransi… isn't there anything else you want to say to me?"

Liu Tongyi raised his eyebrows and said, "*With his affections at Mount Wu engaged, what needs King Xiang in dreams to seek Jiangnan*?"[8]

I smiled bitterly. "Don't worry, Chancellor Liu. Henceforth, I will not mention such things again."

"It grows late," Liu Tongyi said. "I fear if I stay longer, I will be disturbing Your Highness's rest. I will bid you farewell."

Vapor from the lake beyond the railing seeped into the folds of my clothing. Cold entered my heart.

"Very well," I said, "I'll see you out."

Liu Tongyi and I left the waterside pavilion together. It was dusk now, with ruddy clouds covering half the sky and the whole lake sunk in twilight. When we reached the gazebo that contained the machinery, I rotated the stone crane, and the floating walkway clanked out once more to link to the shore.

I said, "Ransi…"

Liu Tongyi turned his head and stopped walking. I smiled. "Don't worry. Once we leave here, I won't call you that again."

Liu Tongyi's expression wavered, as if he wanted to say something, but he did not say it.

Halfway through the night, I stood outside the door to my bedroom, looking at the solitary moon and coldly twinkling stars. I couldn't sleep.

Chu Xun's footsteps started and stopped behind me, then started again, and at last crept up to my side. "Your Highness, it is late, and the dews are heavy. Go to sleep."

So I returned to the room with him. I lay down and still found it hard to sleep.

Suddenly, close to my ear, Chu Xun said softly, "Your Highness, I… would like to return to Twilight House."

I rolled over and took his hand under the covers. "A-Mi no longer wishes to stay with me?"

"Staying here, I can give Your Highness no help, perhaps only make trouble," said Chu Xun.

I frowned and said, "Who told you that?"

Chu Xun did not speak again. But in fact it would be good for him to return to Twilight House.

So I sighed and said, "Then stay with me until tomorrow. After breakfast, I'll have you escorted back."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Chu Xun said quietly.

The next morning, Chu Xun returned to Twilight House. My bed was once again empty, and my heart felt empty too.

Some days later, Yun Yu once again invited me to Yuehua Pavilion. This time we occupied only a small, secluded courtyard, the two of us sitting on the veranda. Yun Yu said, "I detect an anxious cast to Your Highness's expression. Have you suffered some recent setback?"

I picked up my wine cup. "That's funny. If you can detect anxiety on my face, you might easily take over the work of the Ministry of Justice or the Court of Judicial Review, or the soothsayer in the street."

Yun Yu shook his head. "You flatter me. It's too bad there is no mirror here for Your Highness to see your face." He rotated his wine cup with a half-smile. "I hear Chu Xun recently returned to Twilight House. He isn't the moody sort. Did you do something to upset him, Your Highness?"

I rubbed the center of my brow and set down my cup. "Supervisor Yun, what gossip have you been listening to now? Just tell it to me all at once."

Yun Yu sipped his wine and said with a smile, "It's nothing, only I've heard that lately Your Highness has begun another love affair. You've turned your attentions to Chancellor Liu and have no more time for Young Master Chu Xun. I thought this was a scurrilous rumor. But seeing Your Highness's expression today, the romantic tragedy written across your features, I am forced to conjecture and ask pointed

questions. I am being a little meddlesome. Don't take offense, Your Highness."

I had expected Yun Yu to know about Chu Xun returning to Twilight House. As for Ransi visiting that day and my taking him to the waterside pavilion, Yun Yu must have been aware of that too. If he didn't say something to me about it, that wouldn't be like Yun Yu.

Feigning glibness, I said, "Chancellor Liu's visit to Huai Manor was perfectly ordinary. Though I really do not know why Chu Xun suddenly wanted to return to Twilight House. I haven't felt comfortable going to see him again these past few days, alas."

"Chu Xun isn't normally moody," said Yun Yu. "Go see him, Your Highness. Say something. I think it'll be fine. Hasn't Your Highness always been good at talking people around?"

"Thank you for the compliment, Supervisor Yun," I said unflappably, "though I am certainly unworthy of such praise. Speaking of which, your anger must have burned out, since you invited me to dine. A few days ago at Yuehua Pavilion, I really don't know what I said to upset you. Your expression was all wrong. Was it really something I said that touched a sore spot?"

Yun Yu's expression stilled slightly. He said indifferently, "Oh, I would have forgotten all about it had Your Highness not mentioned it. I just happened to run into some trouble that day, so I behaved a little rudely. Please forgive me."

"It's nothing, it's nothing," I said hastily. "I was just mentioning it."

I had brought this up only to stop Yun Yu talking and facilitate changing the subject. Half a pot of wine later, with feigned carelessness, I asked Yun Yu, "How have things been at court lately? I have not been to the palace these past few days."

Yun Yu's brows pinched together. "It's been all right, perfectly peaceful on the surface, only… His Majesty… almost certainly knows something. He is making preparations." Yun Yu fixed his eyes on me. "His Majesty has not summoned Your Highness these past few days?"

I shook my head. "No."

There had been absolute silence from Qizhe recently. Since that day at Huai Manor when I had given him that earnest counsel, I had not been summoned into the imperial presence.

But that had put me in a precarious state. I didn't know what the emperor was planning.

"There will certainly be preparations," I continued. "We considered that while laying our plans. But they are unlikely to have concrete evidence, and none of the

generals or ministers have taken action recently. Come the fifth month, everything will be as good as settled. Even if they know, there will be nothing they can do to us."

Frowning, Yun Yu said, "I suppose so." He held back his sleeve and poured the wine. "But my father has heard a piece of news. In the next few days, His Majesty may be summoning Your Highness Prince Huai and some other princes to the palace for a conference. I do not know for what purpose."

This news surprised me somewhat. The empress dowager had always kept me strictly segregated from the older princes and, in order to keep us from joining forces, often played favorites among us. Apart from the first day of each year or some major event we were required to attend together, I had scarcely ever discussed affairs of state with the other princes of my generation. If this news were true, I could surmise little of Qizhe's intentions.

"Then I'll find out when I go," I said.

Yun Yu looked at me. "I have always counseled Your Highness in the past, and I must say it again. Liu Tongyi is a difficult character. Your Highness ought to stay away from him. Do not be taken in by him."

I couldn't help smiling. "You worry too much, Suiya. What could Liu Tongyi do to take me in, and how could I be taken in? Oh, yes, Suiya, I trust you have been managing in the imperial presence and at court?"

Yun Yu looked at me again, then downed the wine in his cup in one gulp. Then he said, "It is only at such a time that Your Highness would use my courtesy name. I am so unaccustomed to hearing it that it took me a moment to understand what you were saying." He looked at me with another half-smile. "It seems that Your Highness's feelings for Chancellor Liu are profound indeed."

It must be said Yun Yu's eyes were very sharp.

"So what if they are?" I said. "I'm not so dazzled that I can't see how things stand. We just aren't the same kind of person. Sometimes who one has feelings for—or doesn't—is down to fate."

Yun Yu nodded slowly, his eyes settling on some unknown spot. "Very true, it must be fate." He raised his hand, poured another cup of wine, and downed it.

I also raised my cup. Inadvertently, we emptied three or four pitchers.

When the wine in the fourth pitcher ran out, Yun Yu stood and went to bring a fifth from inside. It seemed he had been prepared today; a full jug had already been prepared.

After a few more cups, my head began to feel heavy. I waved my hand and said, "Enough, enough, I can't drink anymore. Trying to drown one's sorrows in wine only brings more sorrow. Let's put an end to it."

Yun Yu, leaning against the railing, shook the wine pitcher. "When you have drunk a thousand cups, drunk to intoxication, then a thousand sorrows will be relieved."

"That's spurious reasoning," I said. "Anyway, let's say I *am* sick with frustration over unrequited longing for Chancellor Liu. You're guzzling down no less than I am. Was I right? Is there a knot in your chest you wish to ease?"

Clutching the wine pitcher, Yun Yu frowned. He stared at me, then suddenly said, "Since wine cannot relieve our sorrows, then shall we switch to a different method?"

He put down the wine pitcher. Leaning against the railing, he smiled at me. "What if the two of us, with our inextinguishable sorrows, help each other find some relief?"

"How?" I said.

Yun Yu looked at me with a smile. "Is Your Highness's heart so set on pursuing Chancellor Liu that you can't understand me even when I put it like that?"

"Indeed, I do not understand," I said.

Yun Yu looked at me for a moment, straightened up, and came to me. Another moment, and I froze.

I am not an idiot. Naturally I understood what Yun Yu meant. I had heard these jokes before. It was just that they had only ever been jokes.

But now…

In my youth, as Qitan and Qili did now, I, too, had often taken coquetry for romance. I remember I had frequented brothels then and once wrote a slightly salacious and not very prosodically sound quatrain:

The fog condenses on round cherries,
The dew weighs down banana fronds.
The moon sinks into emerald waters;
Tonight the cotton rose lies becalmed.

A pile of nonsense to look at it now. I wanted very much to pretend I hadn't written it. But at the time I had been very pleased with myself, even inscribed the poem on a bed canopy and presented it to the prostitute who was with me then. Of course, he couldn't very well have told me it was bad, and looked touched when he

received it.

Every man has been frivolous in his youth.

At this moment, with my lips and tongue locked with Yun Yu's, the final two lines of that poem inexplicably emerged in my mind. I didn't know why.

Perhaps it was the stillness of the flowers at the base of the steps, perhaps the softness of the breeze on the veranda, or perhaps the faint fabric perfume within my embrace.

To tell the truth, however you looked at it, temper aside, there was no fault to be found with Yun Yu. I knew he wasn't like me and normally had no thoughts in that direction. But right now, I couldn't very well resist having such thoughts.

When I had nearly sunk into those waters, I captured a sliver of reason, took Yun Yu by the shoulders, and moved him away from me. I took a deep breath and with forced calm said, "Supervisor Yun, this isn't something to joke about."

Yun Yu's eyes were like a lake wreathed in mist, slightly curved. "Now Your Highness has stopped calling me Suiya."

One sentence, a handful of words, became a fine silk thread that stitched a circle at the very tip of my heart.

I smiled bitterly. "Supervisor Yun, another step, and the joke will become reality."

"And if it really should relieve our sorrows, why not?" Yun Yu said. He was also smiling. "Your Highness and I are already established in rumor anyway."

"Rumor is one thing," I said, "and reality is another. I recall that you aren't one of my kind, Supervisor Yun."

"It's only to relieve our sorrows," Yun Yu said. "Why quibble?"

The worry was that this relief would only lead to ever more sorrow. I sighed and said, "Suiya, I'm not blind. You have something on your mind today, I can tell." There was a smile on Yun Yu's lips, but none in his eyes. Instead his expression held confusion. This looked a little like that common saying—might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

I continued, "You're keeping it all bottled up inside, presumably because you have encountered some difficulty you can't share with others. But you can't fall out with yourself over that. What's more, what if after we've finished relieving our sorrows, I fall for you, but you have someone else. What would I do then?"

Yun Yu laughed. "Your Highness's heart is filled with Chancellor Liu. No one else will fit. I wouldn't be so unreasonable as to try forcing my way in." He disentangled himself and took a few steps back. My arms felt colder without him.

Then I rose. “Even if you mean nothing by it, Suiya, could you call me Chengjun?”

Yun Yu stood by the table a few steps away from me, looking at me now and then. Finally he said, “I do not dare. When Your Highness becomes emperor, if we have a falling out one day, perhaps it will be counted as an offense that I dared to call you by name.”

It was precisely because of this that even if Yun Yu had been to me like a favorite type of grass to a rabbit, I would have gnawed the bark off all the old trees in the world before turning my thoughts to him.

We were fellow conspirators, wary of each other, and in reality, I was plotting against Yun Yu. If I were to do anything of a relieving type with him, I would truly be inhuman.

Yun Yu picked up the wine pitcher again and poured out a cup. He raised it and downed it in one gulp. “Fine. If it would be an imposition, carrying on will only be irritating. That would be no good.” He looked at me with a half-smile. “I hadn’t thought Your Highness’s feelings for Chancellor Liu were so profound. Is Liu Tongyi all that?”

I returned to my seat and gave a cough. “That’s a matter of opinion. I like his looks, and his temperament seems to suit me.”

Yun Yu nodded, then said nothing else. A painful silence followed. I felt embarrassed and couldn’t keep my seat. I rose and said, “I have other things to do. I must leave.”

“Please go on ahead, Your Highness,” Yun Yu said dully. “I will stay a while longer.”

“Very well, then,” I said.

When I turned to leave, Yun Yu said behind me, “If His Majesty really does summon Your Highness to the palace for a conference, please pay attention.”

I turned and said, “Don’t worry. No matter what, His Majesty can’t really arrest his imperial uncle just like that.”

Except that Yun Yu had told me to pay attention, not to be careful. There must have been something strange afoot.

Chapter Five

Yun Tang's information was indeed useful. The next day, first thing in the morning, an imperial edict arrived ordering me to go to the palace for a conference.

This gathering seemed quite imposing. Apart from myself, a number of other princes in the generation above His Majesty had come.

Prince Zong, Prince Jia, Prince Fu, Prince Shou, Prince Lu, and I—put together, we made up a banquet of six princes.

I didn't know what matters the emperor planned to confer with me and the five other princes about at this conference. Qizhe was very young, but his statecraft was sophisticated. His actions were often beyond expectation, making it difficult to guess his intentions.

I had grown lazy from my days recuperating at home. In my formal attire with my hair in a crown, I felt quite constrained, and on top of that, it was almost summer. The many layers of my court robes felt stifling. I had to put a fan in my sleeve so I could at least cool off in the sedan.

In the palace, a young eunuch came forward to lead me to Xiude Hall, a tranquil hall with a spacious and cool interior, not far from the imperial gardens. When I arrived, Prince Jia, Qili, and Prince Lu were already seated; Prince Shou was in poor health, and for some years Shou Manor had been for all intents and purposes under Qili's control as heir. Prince Shou could not undertake the journey today, and so Qili was substituting for him as usual. Qili stood and bowed to me. I exchanged courteous greetings with my cousins Prince Jia and Prince Lu, then took a seat.

The head seat in Xiude Hall was the emperor's throne, while the other six were arranged in two rows of three facing each other. I ought to have sat at the end of the western row, but Qili had come in his father's place, and he belonged to the generation below me, so he sat in the last seat instead. I moved up one position and sat between Prince Lu and Qili. As soon as I sat down, I took out my fan to cool myself. Across from me, Prince Jia frowned.

My five cousin princes were all much older than me, especially Prince Zong and Prince Jia, who were the eldest, even older than my father would have been. These two had never had much contact with me, and certainly they had no opinion of

Huai Manor's style or my proclivities.

There had been discord between the father of Chengdian, the current Prince Jia, and my father. Reportedly, the resentment originated in a struggle for favor between the consort mothers of the late Prince Jia and my father. The previous Prince Jia had been in league with Liu Xian and his ilk, and he had repeatedly asked the Tongguang emperor to take away my father's military authority in order to forestall his supposed rebellion. To allay his grudge against my father, the Tongguang emperor had assigned the late Prince Jia's son, Chengdian, to my father's forces, and told my father to instruct him in warcraft and martial arts, but Chengdian, being proud and ambitious, would never submit to my father's discipline. Once, when my father returned to the capital, Chengdian seized the opportunity to launch a sneak attack on the foreign forces on his own initiative, and as a result, fell into a trap and lost over a thousand soldiers. My father punished him in accordance with military procedure. The late Prince Jia went to my father to intercede for him, but my father never deviated from his course; he refused, and father and son hated him even more, believing that the whole thing had been set up by my father to ensnare Chengdian. The feud became ever more entrenched.

By the time the Yingchang emperor ascended the throne and my father voluntarily relinquished part of his military authority to Chengdian and recommended him to the Yingchang emperor for promotion to commander in chief, the late Prince Jia, Chengdian, and the Yingchang emperor all thought that my father was insincere. They didn't appreciate it at all.

Though Jia Manor and Huai Manor had always been at odds, Chengdian truly was a loyal prince. When the empress dowager pretended to recruit me, Chengdian thought that I had consolidated my power over the court and was planning unknown insults against the emperor's loyal subjects. So he tossed his sleeves in a rage and gave up that bit of military authority, which no one had ever wanted him to give up, and shut himself in Jia Manor to write poetry expounding upon his emotions all day. I'd heard that for a time one whole wall of Jia Manor's study had been plastered with Prince Jia's sentimental poems. Among them, one long poem, the "Song of the Old Goose," was particularly well-known. In it, Prince Jia compared Qizhe to the sun, me to dark clouds blotting the sky, and himself to a firm and unyielding old goose.

He was convinced that all good and evil in the world would ultimately receive their just rewards. One day there would be an end to all treacherous ministers. Dark clouds could only temporarily obscure the sun and sky. In the end, the world would

burn away the blight and reveal the universe in its full brilliance. The old goose, though his wings be broken by hail, his feathers all plucked by the raging winds swirling through the dark clouds, and his head nearly buried in snow, would continue to lie dormant in heaps of withered grass, on the branches of old trees, holding his head high to look to the sky until the day came when sunlight shone upon him, letting him regrow his plucked feathers and soar through the blue heavens beside the sun.

Prince Jia collected the long and short poems he had written over the years into an anthology, which he called *Songs of a Wild Goose in a Thatched Hut*. He had dozens of copies printed. My father-in-law, Li Yue, had received one, and it was said that when he read it, he wept and did not eat for two days. Out of curiosity, I also got myself a copy. I was young and impetuous then. Reading the "Song of the Old Goose" left me very moved. I could not help offering commentary: "Wild geese migrate north in spring and summer, and travel south in autumn and winter. How could one have its wings broken by hail, or be buried in snow? Only a house sparrow or something of the sort spends all four seasons in one place."

I spoke these words while standing on the veranda in Huai Manor. There were more than a few spies among Huai Manor's servants. Before the day was out, my words became known outside my residence and passed from mouth to mouth till at last the whole capital knew that Prince Huai had said the old goose Prince Jia was no better than a house sparrow.

For a time, all the capital's literati who believed themselves sole beacons of purity in this polluted world were righteously indignant. They wrote poems and articles to express their feelings. The natural order had been turned upside down. The sparrow ran amok, while the wild goose could not spread his wings. The sparrow even dared to mock the brave eagle.

Someone made a drawing of a fat sparrow squatting on the back of a little rooster; the caption read: "Disdain for All Creation."

A servant came with that drawing and some poems to report to me: "Your Highness, Your Highness, the capital's pedants are mocking Your Highness."

I was at a loss. Let them mock. It must be known that the mouths of pedants are like the waters of a flood; the more you try to stop them, the harder they gush. I could only look at that drawing and say, "The sparrow is round and fat, which is very endearing, and the little rooster is drawn very vividly. It's quite nice. Let them do what they will. Everyone likes different birds. Some people like eagles and geese, while I quite like sparrows."

Naturally, these words in their turn were repeated by the spies, and again passed through many mouths, transforming into all kinds of rumors. One rumor went that Prince Huai had said that sparrows ate well, while geese and eagles went hungry, so sparrows were greater than geese and eagles. Another went that Prince Huai had compared himself to a prosperous sparrow and was proud to like handsome roosters; the hecklers were a swarm of houseflies to him. Yet another went that Prince Huai had said he was like a sparrow and could do without those orioles and swallows.

To compare the enraged defenders of justice to effeminate orioles and swallows was terrible insult and slander. These rumors naturally made the righteously indignant literati even more righteous and indignant, and to the record of my achievements, in addition to persecuting loyal subjects, another brilliant page was added.

Therefore, Prince Jia's ability to greet me with a bare minimum of politeness today showed excellent understanding and considerable self-restraint. He had always been a stickler. When I began to fan myself in Xiude Hall, in his eyes, it was a colossal violation of protocol, a gesture of disrespect, a sign that I had no regard for my nephew the emperor.

Prince Lu was fairly close to Prince Jia, and he had also never had any time for me. Fortunately, I had Qili sitting next to me as well. I chatted with him a bit, and Qili asked, "Has Prince Dai come to see you these past few days, Imperial Uncle?"

"No," I said.

It wasn't for nothing that I had doted on Qitan. Since my injury, he had come running to Huai Manor regularly, each time bringing something with him, and he hadn't taken anything away once. The things he brought all belonged to his collection of plunder: a jade ornament belonging to a medicine deity that could prevent disease and disaster; a wine gourd that had been used by the famous physician Hua Tuo; a medicine jar given to Emperor Wu of Han by Dongfang Shuo, which could double the efficacy of medicines decocted in it; and so on. Of course none of them were real, and most of them had been bought with my money. But he gave them to me sincerely, taking them for the real thing, and I did feel quite gratified and touched. However, for the last couple of days, I had in fact seen nothing of him.

"Yes, from what I hear," said Qili, "there is a traveling merchant from Lingnan planning to sell him a set of items, including the oil lamp Zhuge Kongming used while assembling a formation that brought deliverance from battle, the zither he

played while executing the Empty Fort Strategy, an oxhorn comb used by Meng Huo's wife, and the cloth that Zhao Zilong used to bundle a-Dou."[9]

My heart dropped. "Sounds like quite a bit."

"At least from what I hear," Qili said, "he'll want a few hundred thousand liang of silver for it all."

I thought my face must have turned green by now. I considered telling Yun Tang and Wang Qin to just hurry up with that uprising.

"Do not fret too much, Imperial Uncle," Qili consoled me. "Prince Dai has improved a lot lately. He is still only in talks with that traveling merchant. He won't necessarily purchase the items."

It would be a strange thing if he didn't. I said to Qili, "I'm going to be busy at home for the next few days. Why don't you tell him for me that Imperial Chancellor Liu is an expert appraiser, and he should ask the chancellor to look at the items with him. That will be more reliable."

Liu Tongyi was the only one who could keep Qitan from squandering all my money. Unfortunately, after what had taken place in the waterside pavilion, if I asked him for help again, it would be a little awkward. Qitan would have to ask himself.

As I was speaking, Prince Zong and Prince Fu also arrived. After delivering greetings, they took their seats. Prince Zong stared at the fan in my hand and said, "Isn't it a little inappropriate for you to wave your fan in the hall, Prince Huai?"

I shut the fan and returned it to my sleeve. "Thank you for the reminder, my royal brother. My negligence led me to be disrespectful."

Prince Zong looked at me again but said nothing else.

He was like Prince Jia; he had never liked me. But the reason for his dislike was different.

Prince Zong, Chengyuan, was the oldest of my generation of princes, with an honest and forthright disposition. He had served as a deputy general under my father. Though he was older than my father, he had always been respectful toward him as his young imperial uncle. After my father's death, he looked after me and my mother. Later, when I picked up my little hobby, Prince Zong was enraged. He would often strike a table while lecturing me. Unfortunately, I refused to mend my ways, and Prince Zong gradually became estranged from Huai Manor.

He had always thought I was a failure, a disgrace to the heroic legacy my father had left for the title of Prince Huai, and that I had proclivities that made others contemptuous of me. Therefore, whenever he saw me, he would put on an

expression of intense suffering.

When I saw that expression of his, I often felt a trace of guilt. While he suffered, I felt miserable and ill at ease. So, unless it was a matter of utmost necessity, Prince Zong and I did not see each other.

After I put away my fan, the atmosphere inside the hall stiffened. Fortunately it was just then that the emperor arrived.

Qizhe's mien was solemn, his brows slightly knit. It seemed we had come to confer on a subject of grave import. When the other princes and I had all performed our bows and resumed our seats, Qizhe said, "We have asked you all here today because of a matter that is of vital concern to the state but nonetheless difficult to discuss openly in court. We will first deliberate with our imperial uncles."

We all listened with respectful attention. Qizhe paused briefly, then continued, "Recently, the Kingdom of Nahe dispatched an ambassador to court to hold peace negotiations. They have offered us two of their cities, yearly tribute, and eternal vassalage."

When these words were spoken, the other princes present all looked pleased, and Prince Zong and Prince Jia's pleasure was especially evident. We had been at war with the Kingdom of Nahe for many years. The fighting was already going on when my father was young and continued as new roads became old roads. Nahe's old king had passed away, and his only child, a daughter, had taken the throne. Our nation believed that with a woman in charge, we could win some advantage, and immediately attacked in full force. To everyone's surprise, the queen, a girl in her teens, was no softer than a man. She joined battle at the head of her own forces and beheaded one of our army's generals. From there, the fierce fighting continued.

But her little barbarian kingdom really couldn't support a decades-long war. Since the ceasefire four or five years ago, she had not attacked the border again, and it was said she had also taken some Han scholars as officials while the kingdom recuperated and rebuilt. Now Nahe had dispatched an ambassador for peace talks and was willing to become a vassal state; this truly was great news.

But from the solemnity of my imperial nephew's countenance, it appeared that these peace talks weren't going to be so simple; the Kingdom of Nahe had made some particular stipulation.

Cautiously, I said, "Since Your Majesty took up the reins of power, your benevolent rule has spread far, and there has been peace and plenty throughout the empire. It is only to be expected that a little barbarian kingdom would submit

before the prosperity of our empire as well as the wisdom and sagacity of our emperor. For it to bow its head and become a vassal state is only a matter of course, but the barbarians are cunning. Perhaps they have made some improper request?"

Sure enough, Qizhe sighed solemnly and said, "That is precisely what troubles us. Nahe's ambassador has made a request that we do not know how to respond to."

"If it can trouble Your Majesty, it must be thorny indeed," I said. "In exchange for paying annual tribute, do they wish for gifts of gold and silk from us? Or do they wish to learn some agricultural techniques or to borrow some crop seeds?"

None of the barbarian kingdoms were skilled in agriculture, and they had always been envious of our silk goods and dying techniques.

I added jokingly, "At least Nahe's old king has passed away, and now there is a queen on the throne. A king would have wanted a diplomatic marriage with one of our princesses. This queen at least won't ask us for a prince."

Qizhe raised his eyes, looked straight at me, and nodded slowly.

The hall was briefly still.

Qizhe sighed, his expression still solemn. "Imperial Uncle, unfortunately you have it right. Nahe's ambassador has said that their queen is in the prime of her youth, still unwed, and she has always admired the literary talents and beautiful countenances of this empire's men. She requests a king consort to share her throne and rule the kingdom with her to demonstrate the sincerity of their vassalage and the peace."

My cousins, my royal nephew Qili, and myself were all amazed. Shaking his head with great suffering, Prince Jia said, "The conduct of barbarian women is truly shocking."

Prince Fu also shook his head. "Absurd, absolutely absurd! Is there not a single man to be found in the whole Kingdom of Nahe that the queen can marry?"

"Nahe's men are short and brawny," Prince Zong said, furrowing his brow. "There is truly no comparison with the men of our empire."

Prince Lu said, "Only princesses have ever gone to make diplomatic marriages. Are we really going to offer up a groom? What a joke that will be to posterity!"

My cousins were deeply distressed, but I consulted my nephew the emperor's august countenance and thought it seemed that he did have some intention of offering the queen a groom. Matters had reached a critical pass. Smoothing the emperor's scales would accomplish two things: first, it would keep him from suspecting the rebellion, and second, once my meritorious deed was accomplished, adding my actions today, it would be loyalty on top of loyalty; would that not be a

good thing?

So I said, "As I see it, if we did agree to this diplomatic marriage, it would not necessarily be a bad thing."

All my cousins looked my way. Prince Zong frowned, and Prince Jia snorted. Only Prince Fu played along. He said, "Why do you say this, Prince Huai?"

"This request for a marriage alliance shows that the queen must truly admire the men of this empire, and she has promised to share her throne. Though the queen is a barbarian woman, all women in the world are easily swayed. When a woman marries, naturally she follows her husband. If we do send her a groom, the Kingdom of Nahe will be as good as within our grasp. When the queen's children are born, they will belong to this empire's bloodline. Then, perhaps, without expending so much as a single soldier, we will be able to annex Nahe."

My cousins looked quite unconvinced, but they said nothing to refute me. Qizhe deliberated in silence awhile, then said, "What you say makes sense, Imperial Uncle. We have also thought along such lines. That is what has led us to hesitate."

Prince Fu said, "If we really are to choose someone to go to Nahe as king consort, whom shall it be?"

Prince Lu said, "This barbarian woman is a queen after all. To be suitable for her, he must be a prince, a prince's son, or the son of an important courtier."

Prince Zong said, "Nahe's queen is in her twenties. Nahe's women are all dark of complexion, though it is said that the queen is not unbeautiful. The princes and princes' sons of this empire either already have settled brides, or they are too young. There appears to be no one suitable among them."

Prince Fu nodded and said, "It seems we must choose among the sons of the important courtiers."

Perhaps when he summoned the princes here today, the emperor had planned to have them offer up one of their own sons out of fealty to the nation. But Prince Zong and the others had many years of experience; they were crafty politicians. Prince Zong's statement had taken all their sons out of the running.

Prince Fu said, "I am not well acquainted with the sons of the important courtiers. Prince Huai and my royal nephew Qili ought to be more familiar with them." His gaze swept over me and Qili, becoming pregnant with meaning as it reached me.

Qili was unwed. As deliberations had gone on about the choice of groom, he hadn't made a sound as he sat beside me. He must have been secretly worried. Now that Prince Zong had made certain of his safety, he was immediately energized.

Smiling, he said, "To pick the best from among the sons of the important courtiers, little thought needs be given. The most common saying in the capital is 'If you would speak of men beyond compare, look no further than Chancellor Liu and Secretary Yun.'"

Chancellor Liu—Liu Tongyi. Secretary Yun—Yun Yu.

Qili added, "Chancellor Liu is a pillar of this court. Of course he isn't an option."

The hall was silent. Finally, I couldn't resist saying, "Yun Yu is not suitable either. We must look elsewhere for a candidate."

Prince Zong, Prince Jia, Prince Fu, Prince Lu, and even Qizhe all looked my way. Qizhe raised his eyebrows and said, "Oh? Yun Yu is the perfect choice from the standpoint of background, appearance, and erudition. Why not him?"

"There are a few unsuitable points," I said. "First, Yun Yu is sharp-tongued and unconventional. Our choice of king consort ought to be a generous person with a gentle temperament who will be able to sway the queen. Second, Yun Yu is a little romantic. Is the queen a woman who can tolerate sharing her husband? We want a devoted gentleman. Third, Yun Yu is Yun Tang's son. That item alone merits careful consideration."

Qizhe stared at me, apparently deep in thought. Prince Jia said with a sneer, "The points of opposition Prince Huai has brought up contradict each other. You say that Yun Tang's son is romantic. Isn't a romantic perfect for pleasing a woman? He can be tender, and in doing so, sway the queen. There is a hint in your third point, but to my knowledge, Prince Huai has always been close to the Yun family, and often fraternizes with this son of theirs in particular. It does give one cause to consider."

"I have no answer when my royal brother Prince Jia puts it that way. I am only doing my utmost to perform my duty as a subject, speaking on the topic at hand. Everything will be up to His Majesty to decide." I looked loyally at the throne.

Qizhe stood and sighed again. "There is another thing that we had not meant to speak of. The ambassador of the Kingdom of Nahe, in requesting this marriage, named their choice."

Once again, the princes, Qili, and myself were all surprised. Qizhe looked at me and put his hands behind his back. "The ambassador said that the queen likes slightly older men, especially those with self-possession, consideration, and an understanding of pleasure. For instance…"

Qizhe stared directly at me. I suddenly had a bad feeling.

"For instance, someone like Prince Huai."

The hall was once again silent. I said seriously, "Your Majesty, I am a cutsleeve."

Self-possession, consideration, and an understanding of pleasure were in fact especially notable among my numerous charms. I was amazed that the queen, far away in a foreign land, would have got wind of such things. It was truly unfortunate that my interests would never change.

Qizhe continued to gaze at me without any expression. "The ambassador said that the queen is aware of this, but it is her belief that our empire's women are not good enough, which has driven His Highness Prince Huai to such predilections in spite of himself. She believes that she can make His Highness Prince Huai cease to be a cutsleeve."

So… so… had word of my exploits really spread so far?

Qizhe was still staring at me. He continued, "The ambassador has also informed us that the queen wanted to pass on a message to His Highness Prince Huai at all costs. The queen wishes to ask Prince Huai, *Do you still recall that drizzly afternoon and the vow we made on the little bridge outside the city walls?*"

The hall fell even more silent. The meaningful looks and meaningful expressions left me perplexed.

With a sigh, Qizhe said, "Imperial Uncle, we wish to ask, how could the Queen of Nahe make a vow with you on a drizzly afternoon, on a small bridge outside the city walls?"

With infinite sincerity, I said, "Your Majesty, I truly am a cutsleeve. I have never been outside our borders, nor have I ever gone near the Kingdom of Nahe."

Qizhe sighed at great length. "Then was it in a dream that the queen met you on a bridge to make a vow in the drizzle?"

I have always considered myself a romantic but not inconstant person. Up to the present, I had never made a vow with anyone, never mind that this foreign Queen of Nahe was all the way at the ends of the earth. Even before I was a cutsleeve, I could have had no connection with her.

I set forth my views earnestly, carefully analyzing every word. If this stuck, it would be no joke. There was every chance it would be considered collusion with an enemy nation.

I talked, and Qizhe listened. I didn't know whether he believed me.

Qili put in a word for me. "Despite what the ambassador has said, Imperial Uncle may not have made such a vow. Perhaps the queen wishes to sow discord between Your Majesty and Imperial Uncle, or perhaps someone else with a hidden agenda

impersonated Imperial Uncle. I wonder whether the ambassador has said what the Prince Huai whom the queen swore an oath with looked like?"

Qizhe put his hands behind his back and said with a smile, "We have not yet asked. We wished first to ask Imperial Uncle about it."

Prince Fu said, "Why not send someone to ask the ambassador of Nahe whether the queen described Prince Huai's appearance to him, and if she did, send a number of men of similar age to appear before him along with Prince Huai, so that he can identify him. Won't it be clear then?"

Prince Zong and Prince Lu thought this was an excellent idea. Only Prince Jia objected: "There are so many ways of sowing discord. This barbarian woman occupies the lofty position of queen. She has no need to do this at the cost of her honor. There must be some truth in it. The ambassador has not seen the man who made the vow with the queen. Even if he has heard a description, it must have been vague. We do not know how many years have passed since the vow was made. A man's appearance can change given enough time. Even if the queen herself came, it would probably take even her some time to recognize him. How could the ambassador recognize him at all?"

"I'm a fairly recognizable person," I said. "If someone who has seen me describes my distinctive traits, it should be easy enough to know me. Whether it does any good or not, let us ask. Otherwise, if I truly am to become her groom for the sake of the court, as soon as the Queen of Nahe takes one look and sees I am the wrong man, wouldn't that be a setback for both our lives?"

Next to me, Qili said with a smile, "Imperial Uncle is agitated. He even talks of becoming her groom. I'm afraid if Your Majesty doesn't agree, Imperial Uncle's resentment at this injustice will be irrepressible."

Qizhe knit his brows and looked at me. After a moment, he said, "Very well. This concerns diplomatic ties between our two nations. It is no small matter. Let us do as Qili says and send someone to ask the Nahe ambassador."

About half a shichen later, the eunuch who had been sent to ask returned and reported, "The Nahe ambassador says that the queen not only described His Highness Prince Huai's appearance, she also painted a portrait of Prince Huai that hangs in her chambers. He has seen it. If Prince Huai stands before him, he is likely to recognize His Highness."

Once again, everyone in the hall looked my way, my nephew the emperor included.

Prince Fu said, "This barbarian woman really is infatuated."

"Only we do not know who the target of her infatuation is," I added.

Qizhe glanced at me again but said nothing.

So I was to go parade myself before the Nahe ambassador so he could identify me.

This identification was nothing like having a victim point to a criminal in the Ministry of Justice's courtroom. It had to be a little more tactful, more circuitous, more in keeping with the dictates of etiquette.

Therefore, quite a lot of bother went into advance preparations for this identification. The Ministry of Rites took the lead. On the emperor's orders, a small banquet was arranged in the imperial gardens to entertain the ambassador, and I and a number of slightly older imperial kinsmen of the younger generation, all close to me in age, were invited to attend.

I went home to change into casual clothes. When I returned to the palace, I first made my way to a small hall to join my royal nephews, then together we proceeded to the imperial gardens.

The Nahe ambassador was in his forties or fifties, with dark skin and a turban wound around his head. The two sides of his mustache turned up; perhaps it had been deliberately shaped that way with paste. In all, he had a strong air of foreignness. He stared intently as my royal nephews and I approached. When we had taken our seats, he babbled something into the ear of the Han attendant beside him.

The attendant spoke toward the head of the banquet: "Reporting to Your Majesty, Lord Alunan says that these princes and princes' sons are unfamiliar to him. That person is not among them."

When I heard this, I instantly felt as if the clouds had parted and the sky had cleared.

Qizhe sat upright on his throne at the head of the banquet. Smiling, he said, "The one in the purple robes there is our imperial uncle Prince Huai."

The Han attendant immediately whispered into the ear of the ambassador, who abruptly sat up straight and stared at me, then babbled a great deal of things to the Han attendant, who reported: "Your Majesty, Lord Alunan says that it absolutely cannot be this Prince Huai. The Prince Huai the queen admires is well-built and steady, with a step as light as if he had wings. He has a square face. He is a man of unwavering determination and great thoughtfulness."

Ambassador Alunan dipped his finger in wine and drew a few strokes on the table, then babbled something else. The Han attendant continued, "Lord Alunan is

an accomplished artist. He can recreate the portrait painted by the queen. That will tell Your Majesty who this man is."

Why hadn't he said so earlier instead of putting me through all this hassle? I'd been caught up in an imperial banquet before he finally got around to spitting out something so important.

I didn't even bother getting angry. I only wanted to see what man had gotten the idea into his head to carry on with the queen under my name.

Now that I was no longer implicated, while everyone else accepted it, Prince Jia alone looked a little disappointed. As to just who the Prince Huai that the queen had taken a liking to was, everyone present was eager to learn. Qizhe immediately ordered brush, ink, paper, and inkstone to be brought. Foreigners did admire our midlands culture; while Ambassador Alunan could hardly speak a word of our language, he was very familiar with the inks and brushes of our empire. He rolled up his sleeves, took up the brush, and wielded it. One mark later, he had drawn a portrait on the paper.

Two eunuchs came forward bearing the drawing. I looked at it intently. The man portrayed had a square face, thick eyebrows, and a brief, sparse mustache. He did look a steady fellow. I thought it was someone I knew; he was certainly very familiar.

"We do not seem to have seen this man," said Qizhe. "Indeed he looks nothing like Chengjun."

Prince Zong, Prince Jia, Prince Fu, and Prince Lu all took turns saying they had never seen him, that he didn't look like me. Only Qili frowned and said, "I do think I've seen this man somewhere…" He put a hand to his temple. "I think… I think it's… I only saw him once or twice, but I think… he belongs to Huai Manor…"

I had it by now. I stood and acknowledged, "Your Majesty, Prince Shou's heir is correct. The face in this portrait looks a great deal like my sedan carrier Han Si."

This business of the Queen of Nahe ultimately turned into a farce. Qizhe sent to Huai Manor to have Han Si brought into his presence. Han Si was also bewildered. All he did was tremble in Jinluan Hall, claiming that he had been falsely accused as tears coursed down his cheeks. Finally, we verified the facts with the Nahe ambassador, and asked again when this had taken place. At last we began to have a clear idea of the sequence of events.

Three or four years ago, just after the ceasefire between our two nations, the queen had traveled in disguise with a merchant caravan and snuck into our capital.

On a certain day, I had gone to a brothel seeking pleasure, and Han Si and my other servants were waiting for me at the gate when they happened to run into the queen.

The boldness of foreign women was indeed beyond imagining. The queen believed that a brothel of male prostitutes was operated specifically for women to visit, and she wanted to go in and get acquainted. Han Si and the others, concerned that if it came to mischief my mood would be dampened, went to stop her. Among them, Han Si was the most even-tempered. He spoke words of comfort and advised the others not to make trouble for a woman. The queen therefore became smitten with him. It was raining, and the queen did not know the way. She had been separated from her party and was wandering back and forth along the street. Han Si couldn't bear to see this, so he bought an umbrella by the road and took her to the place outside the city walls where she had arranged to meet her attendants.

The queen said to Han Si, *Sentiments have passed between us today. I promise I will come back for you. I will not let you down.*

Han Si thought the sentiment was gratitude, and that this was only a promise to return the favor. Because in this empire, no woman would say such a thing to a man.

But it was indeed an oath, and the queen had not gone back on it. She had come for her king consort.

Han Si wept and solemnly swore that he had told the queen his name was Han Si, that he was a sedan carrier, but because my frequenting brothels of male prostitutes was an inglorious business, he had not dared to reveal what household he belonged to.

The ambassador said that the man who had made a vow with the queen had indeed called himself Han Si, but the queen had thought he couldn't be an ordinary man. She had memorized the design on my sedan and learned through her investigations that it was Prince Huai's, so she took Han Si to be me.

During the course of this investigation, Han Si and the Nahe ambassador were in separate rooms. This left absolutely no possibility of collusion, yet their stories coincided on every point; clearly this was the truth.

For a sedan carrier like Han Si to be swept up in such a romance was more splendid than any legendary tale. Only, I had been dragged in and made to sweat as well.

After the matter had been mostly elucidated, Qizhe summoned me to the imperial study and finally said some words of consolation. "This Queen of Nahe business is truly bizarre. There really was no need for you to go through all that."

"It's all right," I said, "though at the time I really was frightened out of my wits. I was worried Your Majesty would send me to be a groom in a foreign land."

Smiling, Qizhe said, "Didn't we tell you that we wouldn't let a new princess cross your threshold? Why do you distrust us so, Chengjun?"

"Of course I would not dare," I said at once, "but Your Majesty only said that you would not let a princess cross *my* threshold. You said nothing about letting me cross anyone else's. That is why I felt some concern at the time."

Qizhe looked at me intently, then smiled and strolled a few paces away. "This isn't over yet. We do not know whether the Queen of Nahe will still want her beloved Prince Huai as her king consort once she learns he is actually a sedan carrier. If she does, we will have to give Han Si a title to at least give the affair some dignity. Your residence is truly full of talented individuals, Imperial Uncle. Wonderful things are always happening."

"This is a blessing bestowed upon Han Si by heaven, what one hears of as being written in the book of fate. It has nothing to do with me."

Qizhe stopped in his tracks. "But you did get dragged into it in the end, and it has been very stressful for you. The injury to your arm has yet to heal. Go home and rest."

I knelt and touched my forehead to the floor. "I will take my leave. Please do not overexert yourself either, Your Majesty."

Above my head, Qizhe's voice said, "We are very gratified that you are thinking of us, Imperial Uncle."

I left the imperial study and walked slowly toward the palace gate. A sedan passed by. I looked up and saw a familiar daub of dark blue. I couldn't help but feel a stirring in my heart. I stood still, saluted, and said with a smile, "Chancellor Liu, what a coincidence."

He raised his sleeves and bowed in my direction, just as usual, perfectly polite. "Your Highness Prince Huai."

And I said politely to him, "I see you are on the way in. Do you have official business?"

The corners of his lips rose. "Your Highness Prince Huai is on the way out. It appears your important work is finished."

I laughed and said, "I have never done anything of great import."

The smile still lingered on his lips. "I have heard that there is a king consort in Your Highness's home."

Was this a joke? How could he still joke with me after leaving the waterside pavilion that day? I would have expected him to want to put as much distance as possible between us.

Was it mockery? I knew he wasn't the kind of person who took pleasure at the expense of others. Then it was mere politeness. To me, it was a statement I could take as a joke to console myself.

Therefore, I said, "Yes, another notable personage has emerged at Huai Manor. It seems ever more full of talented individuals."

Liu Tongyi looked at me with his clear eyes. I said, "You have important work to do. I won't hold you up. I bid you farewell."

He raised his sleeves and calmly said farewell. I continued on my way to the palace gate. It was dusk, the sky once again half-filled with ruddy clouds.

Han Si did not want to be a groom.

I had thought that the matter of the king consort had come to a temporary close, so when I returned from the palace, I brooded awhile on my sorrows, thinking of my Ransi, then took a nap. When I rose after dark, as soon as I sat down in the small hall, a dark figure burst into the room and prostrated itself, sobbing.

"Your Highness, please take into consideration this lowly one's many years of service… Don't make me go to that foreign land… I have an old mother and father at home, young brothers and sisters. If I go, they won't survive. Please be merciful, Your Highness…"

Han Si did have some brains. He knew well enough how awesome my nephew the emperor was and hadn't dared to cry in the palace; instead he had chosen to come home and cry to me.

"It isn't a question of my mercy," I said. "Your marriage to the queen was fixed by heaven. It is a fated match. In a few days, His Majesty will ennoble you, and the court will support your parents and siblings. There's no need for you to worry. We all of us must make sacrifices for the nation and the people. There are so many who can't even imagine marrying the Queen of Nahe and sharing her throne. Why do you want to avoid it?"

Han Si kept sobbing and sniffling. I had never seen a tall, well-grown man cry like this. Han Si said he was scared of the foreigners. He had heard they all ate raw meat and drank fresh blood, and didn't use salt in their cooking. He said that his mother had always taught him that a true man could never marry into his wife's home.

I had to reason with him, try to enlighten him. On the question of marrying into his wife's home, it mattered a great deal what that home was. If he married the queen now, went to be her king consort, and made peace at the border, the annals of history would certainly record the greatness of his deeds.

Han Si remained unwilling. He said that it was indecent conduct to give up your own family name. Han Si was his nickname, and his full name was Han Chuanbao. If he married that foreign queen, he would certainly have to take her family name, turning himself into a foreigner. He couldn't stand that.

I seemed to recall that the Queen of Nahe's family name was Hehenalu. If Han Si married her, then presumably he would be called Hehenalu Chuanbao or Chuanbao Hehenalu.

I thought that wasn't a bad name.

Han Si was adamant. He would rather die than agree. The racket he made gave me a pounding headache. I was no master of talking people around, and in this case, only gentle persuasion would work; I couldn't scare him. And we were day by day getting closer to the start of the great undertaking. If this continued unsettled, would I be able to take part in the rebellion?

Han Si went on making his ruckus for half the night, until I finally convinced him to go to bed. I ate only half a pitiful bowl of thin porridge before going to bed myself.

The next day, I was still asleep in bed at midmorning when Chief Steward Cao came to report that Supervisor Yun had come. I had been expecting him today.

I rose. Chief Steward Cao said, "Supervisor Yun said he was only stopping by for a visit. When he heard Your Highness had not yet risen, he informed me he would bid farewell for the moment and asked that you be notified. He simply wanted Your Highness to know he had stopped by."

"Go ask Supervisor Yun to wait a bit," I said. "I'm going right now." By the time I was dressed and washed, Chief Steward Cao came again to report that Supervisor Yun had already left.

Yun Yu had never been so impatient before, leaving just like that. I guessed he must have something important to say and thought Huai Manor wasn't the right place to say it. After breakfast, I had an invitation sent to the Yun residence, inviting him to eat at Yuehua Pavilion.

Not long after the note reached the Yun residence and before I could dispatch someone to reserve a place at Yuehua Pavilion, an announcement came that

Supervisor Yun had come.

I was puzzled. What was all this coming and going about?

Yun Yu entered the room and sat. Before I could ask, he said, "Doesn't Your Highness think Yuehua Pavilion is common? Why would you invite me there?"

"You like that place, Supervisor Yun, don't you?" I said. "When inviting someone to a meal, naturally I have to consult their preferences."

Yun Yu smiled. "It is clear Your Highness is more accustomed to being invited than doing the inviting. Spots at Yuehua Pavilion must be reserved in advance. If you reserve them on the day of like this, all the good courtyards will be long gone, and it will be hard to have decent food prepared. I was worried this would ruin Your Highness's fun, so I simply came to visit again."

"No wonder," I said. "You left in such a hurry today, Supervisor Yun, that I thought it was because you preferred Yuehua Pavilion to Huai Manor, so I sent out an invitation at once."

Holding his teacup, Yun Yu said with feigned helplessness, "How fortunate that I have always been good at keeping my seat, that I often come here, and that I am not easily embarrassed. Otherwise, with Your Highness speaking so meaningfully, I might have thought you wanted to throw me out."

I raised my hand. "Don't. I might throw out any other guest, but I would not dare to throw you out, Supervisor Yun. This morning, I rushed to get out of bed and asked to have you detained, but you still must have thought I was remiss and slipped away so quickly. I wanted to invite you to Yuehua Pavilion by way of apology. Coming here to explain yourself is unusually considerate of you."

Sighing, Yun Yu said, "Truly, I merit the harshest punishment. This morning I disturbed Your Highness's rest and withdrew with all sincerity, but that is precisely where disaster arose."

I also sighed and said, "Forget it. I'm scared of you. It's not my first time saying that."

Holding the lid of his cup, Yun Yu slowly agitated the leaves floating in his tea. "Fair enough. Is it because of this that Your Highness told His Majesty that there were lurking concerns about me being the groom in a marriage alliance, and I was not an ideal candidate?"

These words pricked my heart. It seemed that my saying Yun Yu would not be an appropriate match as Yun Tang's son had already been repeated.

At the time, I had been afraid lest Yun Yu become a candidate for king consort. Yun Yu could be relentless, and he could endure. If it really had fallen to him, I was

afraid he would have agreed without demur. A renewal of hostilities at the border coinciding with the domestic rebellion would have settled everything.

I believed that I could handle Yun Tang and Wang Qin at present. However, if the Kingdom of Nahe were added to the mix, Qizhe's throne really would be in danger. Whatever happened, I couldn't let Yun Yu become the king consort.

I rubbed my temples. "I hope you don't blame me for blighting your marriage prospects."

Yun Yu still wore a smile. "Your Highness shielded me before His Majesty. I ought to be grateful. My reputation, and my father's, are out in the open. People are always talking about us. It means nothing for Your Highness to use that as a reason."

To judge from his expression, it truly was smooth sailing. I sensed no ill-feeling.

"Just as long as you don't blame me for meddling," I said. "Yuehua Pavilion is out, but there is a tranquil spot in this residence that I have never invited you to, Supervisor Yun. It's called the waterside pavilion. Why not drink to our hearts' content there today?"

I took Yun Yu onto the floating bridge to the waterside pavilion. Recalling how cautious I had been the day I had taken Ransi this way, I felt a little ridiculous.

Yun Yu stood on the walkway looking out at the broad lakeshore. He tapped the folding fan in his hand. "This is a very elegant waterside pavilion Your Highness has. I didn't know there was such a place in the final courtyard. Is this where Your Highness hides his beauties?"

I turned the stone crane, withdrawing the floating walkway connected to the shore. Yun Yu was impressed. He added, "I must have guessed wrong. With this floating bridge withdrawn, it is more like a water prison. Could it be that Your Highness was locked up here to study by the former Prince Huai?"

"You truly are amazing," I said. "You've guessed it. It seems your talents are wasted working at the Imperial Censorate rather than the Ministry of Justice."

Yun Yu laughed softly.

Here and now, with this person, the scene was a world apart from that day with Ransi. Though the scenery was unchanged, with someone else, my mood was different as well.

I watched Yun Yu contentedly gazing at the heart of the lake, and the thoughts I had kept suppressed in my heart once again stirred.

Yun Yu and I sat by the railing in the lightest and most spacious part of the waterside pavilion, in rattan chairs around a small square table, with a jar of good wine and a few exquisite cold dishes.

Eyes slightly narrowed, Yun Yu said, "This waterside pavilion is a good place to cool off in summer, but in winter, it might be a little cold."

"My father always used to throw me in here to study in the depths of winter. The place was like an icehouse. A dozen burning braziers didn't help. My teeth were chattering, and I still had to keep reading books on warcraft. Though it turned out all right. Later he decided I was hopeless, and my suffering was at an end."

Yun Yu lifted his cup and looked intently at me. "When Your Highness wears the imperial robes in the future and rules the empire, the former Prince Huai will certainly be glad in the underworld."

"Glad?" I couldn't hold back a laugh. "I'll be in luck if the old man doesn't jump out of his coffin and hack me to pieces. All my father ever wanted was to serve the emperor, to be loyal to the nation and the people. But he bore the charge of plotting rebellion in secret. That is the fate of the so-called loyal courtier."

I poured a cup of wine and raised it as well, then rotated it twice. "It is precisely because of this that I have seen through the facade. What is loyalty? What is treachery? The world shouldn't belong to one man forever. Since I already bear the charge of infamy, why not substantiate it? The honest officials who curse me today will have to kneel before me and call me Majesty all the same when I sit up on the throne. As for my father, if he can see me from the underworld, he will also see how his so-called hopeless case commands the empire."

This speech I delivered to the lake, facing into the wind. It was hot-blooded, impassioned.

The Yun and Wang families were full of cunning. I did not know what Yun Yu was thinking of testing me like that, but what I said ought to have settled his mind.

Yun Yu said, "Your Highness is unusually vocal about your convictions today."

"Perhaps because the designated day is close at hand," I said calmly, "I can't quite hold back."

Yun Yu smiled. "Nor can my father and I. We want to see Your Highness take the throne. But this period is crucial for our arrangements. Though we do not want to hold back, still we must."

I took this opportunity to say, "The other day when you told me I must pay attention when I went to court, I wonder what you wanted me to pay attention to?"

Yun Yu sipped his wine, then said, “My father recently received word that Prince Jia seems to have taken on some military authority. I believe some divisions to the north are now in his hands. I wonder whether Your Highness discerned anything in his manner at this banquet of six princes.”

No wonder Prince Jia’s spine had been so much stiffer this time in court. I said, “The old goose Prince Jia is ready to spread his wings and laugh proudly in the face of the frost. He has been dormant for so long, I wonder whether he still remembers what to do with those soldiers now that they are under his command.”

Yun Yu looked up at me and put down his empty cup. “In the present situation, our plans must be laid with precision. We must let nothing slip. Everything must be carefully plotted.”

A faint weariness made its way into his expression. Had there been no rebellion and no plot, had the whole world been like this light and spacious waterside pavilion, what happiness and satisfaction would it have been to sit across from each other like this drinking wine, appreciating the scenery of the lake?

But the circumstances could not be changed at will. Had there been no rebellion, no plot, how could Yun Yu have grown close to me? It was even more impossible that he would be sitting across from me like this drinking wine, looking out on the lake and enjoying the breeze.

I looked at Yun Yu and spoke the words that I had been keeping suppressed in my heart. “There is a piece of advice I have been meaning to give you, but I thought that you would not agree, so I have never said anything. But now we are so close, and the situation is so fraught, I think this might well be a critical piece, so I will say it.”

Yun Yu looked at me, holding his cup. I said, “Suiya, withdraw from this revolt. Do not take part.”

Yun Yu was just lifting his cup to moisten his lips. Hearing this, he instantly looked as if he had choked. “Your Highness… why would you… say such a thing?”

I met his eyes and said, “There truly is no saying whether this attempt will succeed. Wang Qin, your father, and I have put all we have into this effort. Keeping back a hidden piece is planning for the future.”

Yun Yu looked at me wordlessly. I continued, “There is a valley in a certain place in Xinan, though not as prosperous and comfortable as Jiangnan, that is nonetheless picturesque, and fully equipped. It’s about half a month’s travel from the capital.”

I said to Yun Yu that when he left Huai Manor today, he could encounter an assassin along the way. Once he was out of danger, he would need to recover in peaceful surroundings. He would head to the Yun family's villa in Jiangnan. He would break his journey in Xuzhou, stay one night, then continue on his way the next day.

Yun Yu was no longer looking at me but at the wine cup in his hand. He only remarked that my arrangements were very suitable.

"I have pondered this at length," I said. "You are the most suited for this. You have erudition, resourcefulness, courage, and insight, and moreover you are young, with a long future ahead of you."

I spoke from the bottom of my heart. It was proper for Yun Tang and Wang Qin to be executed. But toward Yun Yu, I had always felt pity and even guilt.

Yun Yu was a genius. Qizhe needed honest and benevolent courtiers like Liu Tongyi in his court, but he also needed keen ones such as Yun Yu. Apart from having occasional exploratory conversations on the subject of rebellion with me on his father's orders, Yun Yu had done nothing to betray the court.

Yun Yu put down his wine cup again. "Your Highness, do you say these things to me in jest or in earnest?"

He laughed, stood, and went to the railing. "The arrow is on the string, and perhaps the emperor already has his eyes fixed on us. Here and now, Your Highness would still speak of secret arrangements? It's too late."

"It's not too late," I said. "I speak of it to you because I am capable of following through."

That valley was a line of retreat I had arranged for myself. Everything else aside, I did carry the reputation of the court's greatest malignant tumor. It was well within my power to deliver Yun Yu.

"If we succeed and I ascend the throne, I would immediately summon you back to the capital. If we fail, you will stay there. If you wish to take revenge, you can take revenge. If you wish to change your name and remain, you can remain. At least one of us will survive."

Once Yun Tang and Wang Qin had been executed, if Yun Yu had a change of heart, my nephew the emperor would be willing to overlook past transgressions. It would be best if he allowed Yun Yu to return to court as an official, but I knew that this was not a likely outcome. Let Yun Yu place himself outside of all this and go on living under a different name, or let him come back to seek revenge against me and

stab me to death this time; I would feel better, anyway. Not like now, when every time I looked at him, I felt burdened.

At the railing, Yun Yu turned, then suddenly knelt.

I was startled and quickly rose to lift him to his feet, but it was as if he had been nailed down; none of my efforts could get him to stand. "So Your Highness is not joking. There is no need for Your Highness to be so tactful. I understand. Your Highness Prince Huai has never fully trusted my father and me. When I made the decision to follow Your Highness, I was prepared to die. This is my purpose. But if Your Highness truly cannot trust my father and wishes to use me as a hostage, then I will comply. Only," Yun Yu said, looking up, his eyes and his expression perfectly calm, "if you send me to Xinan now, it will certainly draw suspicion from the palace. Better use drugs to secure me. Your residence ought to be supplied with both slow poisons and drugs to subdue. There are also some bottles prepared at my home."

I had been bending down to lift Yun Yu to his feet, but when I heard this speech, I nearly sat on the ground myself. He might as well have stabbed me, I thought. When it came down to it, all I could say was, "Just… pretend I never said anything."

What I actually wanted to say was, *So that's the kind of person you see me as.*

Or else, *How could I suspect you like that*?

But I lacked the self-assurance to say that. I had been plotting against Yun Yu's life all this time. I was in no position to say anything of the sort.

I could only sigh. I spoke as if bargaining with him, almost begging him: "Pretend I never said anything and stand up now, all right?"

Yun Yu went on kneeling, forcing me to go on: "Supervisor Yun, if I really did suspect you, how could I have treated you like…"

Yun Yu gave a bitter laugh. "I have already reflected on my own actions. Perhaps I have always been too flippant in front of Your Highness. That day at Yuehua Pavilion, I nearly became a seducer. When I was so shameless, how must Your Highness have seen me?"

In my efforts to lift Yun Yu to his feet, I had already ended up sitting on the ground. I didn't know what to say. I struggled and struggled again, but all I could think of was, "Suiya, even to forestall me, you can't hold yourself so cheap."

Finally, Yun Yu raised his head and looked at me. I said to him, bargaining again, "Pretend I never said anything, get up, all right?"

Still Yun Yu did not move. Finally, I felt pushed to say something sincere. "As for Yuehua Pavilion, I know you only acted like that because you had something on

your mind. You were drunk. My sole concern… I was only afraid of taking it for the truth."

Yun Yu's sleeves had been clutched in my hands. Now I let go and found that my palms had been sweating. "Suiya, I'll be honest. In all this time, you're the only person who has not stood on too much ceremony with me, who has become close to me. The princess, the people I've liked, even Chu Xun, none of them have truly cared about me. Of course, Chancellor Liu is even more impossible…"

In reality, all I asked for was someone to truly care about who would truly care for me in turn, someone to chat with, to drink tea with, someone to talk to, day in and day out, never tiring of it—that was all.

But if that person was Yun Yu, then the outlook was grim.

After that day at Yuehua Pavilion, some things had occurred to me, but they could never be. Even if they existed, I could not acknowledge them.

"It's only that, at a time like this, talking about these things can do no good, only harm," I said. "Suiya, you… you know that I am a cutsleeve. If I were to fall in love with you, there would be trouble."

Yun Yu looked at me. After a long moment, he raised his eyebrows. "There certainly would be trouble. Your Highness loves Chancellor Liu. How could you fall for me? Your Highness certainly wouldn't be so fickle."

As he spoke, he finally got to his feet.

I breathed a sigh of relief and stood as well. "Suiya…"

Yun Yu sighed. "Please do not worry, Your Highness. What happened at Yuehua Pavilion will not happen again. What is in my heart will remain there. I will not speak of it."

I said, "Suiya…"

Yun Yu looked at me, then suddenly smiled. "I'm joking. That time at Yuehua Pavilion, I really did have something on my mind. I was drunk. If I'd really had any thought of doing something, supposing Your Highness ascended the throne, I would become a courtier who resorts to seduction. That isn't a very good reputation. However shameless I may be, it would still be a little too much to bear. I'd rather do without."

He smiled again. "We will leave it at that today. There are some things Your Highness and I will both pretend never happened. I wish to take my leave."

I watched him bow. I left the waterside pavilion with him, walked across the floating walkway to the shore. Yun Yu did not speak again, and I could say nothing.

Yun Yu left as soon as we reached the shore. He didn't stay an extra moment. When he was gone, I returned to my room and sat. It took me a long time to recover.

You could say I really was afraid of Yun Yu. All that time, he had been stabbing my heart, each blow stronger than the last. I thought he must have known all along.

Known that actually I loved him.

Liu Tongyi was a dream of rippling moonlight amid the fragrance of osmanthus flowers. It was those lines of poetry he had spoken in the waterside pavilion that had awakened me from the dream, made me understand the tangible good in front of me.

Though I did not wish to dwell on what had taken place at Yuehua Pavilion, I had no choice but to dwell on it. Connecting it with all that had come before, there was absolutely no reason for Yun Yu to have acted that way, unless…

Unless he had fallen for me.

This was a rather bold thought. At my age, I shouldn't have been imagining things like a fresh-faced youth. But in spite of myself, I indulged in imagination. Taking into account Yun Yu's behavior lately… my thoughts became increasingly tangible.

For some reason, with these thoughts, I felt an inexplicable joy. But after the joy came grief.

The rebellion was at hand. When this was over, what would happen to me, and what would happen to Yun Yu?

No matter what, there could be no good outcome.

It was absolutely unjust of me to have plotted against Yun Yu. Perhaps this was my punishment.

But why should Yun Yu share in it?

So on this score, I did not plan to admit defeat.

While I was languishing in my bedroom, a messenger came from the palace to say that my nephew the emperor had cause to summon me.

The emperor's word was absolute; I had no choice but to change into court dress and hasten to the palace.

My nephew the emperor's brow was slightly furrowed. There was a careworn look on his face. He looked at me and asked, "Why do you look so frustrated, Imperial Uncle? Is there something on your mind?"

I quickly said that it was nothing, just that Han Si didn't know what was good for him and refused to marry the queen, and I was attempting to enlighten him.

"Oh, it's about Han Si," said Qizhe. "We thought that he might not be willing to be a king consort. It is no matter if you are not skilled in enlightening others, Imperial Uncle. Yun Yu often goes to your residence, so why not let him talk some sense into Han Si?"

My heart skipped. "I am afraid that neither is Supervisor Yun especially skilled in these matters…"

Qizhe raised a hand and said, "Forget it, we have no interest in wrangling over the king consort question today. If Yun Yu is not skilled in enlightening others, then we will send Chancellor Liu, who is most excellent at it, to your residence." And he really did call over a eunuch and told him to transmit a decree sending Liu Tongyi to Huai Manor for a chat with Han Si.

I watched the eunuch leave to obey this order, in the dark about my nephew the emperor's plans.

Qizhe circled back to the throne and sat, and had a chair brought up beside me. With a smile that showed his teeth, he said, "All right, Chancellor Liu will go to your residence and have a chat with Han Si, and you can stay here and keep us company, Imperial Uncle. We have nothing serious at hand, only something on our mind that we would like to talk over with someone." Another half a tooth showed. "Sit, Imperial Uncle."

Feeling vigilant, I thanked him for his benevolence and sat. Then Qizhe said, "We have been hesitating on the question of a particular person. We do not know the right way to treat him. Should we tackle him, or just let him be?"

"Anyone who could make Your Majesty hesitate must be troublesome indeed," I said.

"You are perfectly correct, Imperial Uncle. This person—we have never been able to understand him. He has always weighed on our heart, leaving us no peace of mind day or night."

I said at once, "Your Majesty, affairs of state may be pressing, but you ought to be more mindful of your health."

"You are always so solicitous toward us, Imperial Uncle," Qizhe said. "You have been ever since we were little. Whatever we wanted, you were always sure to guess."

"Your Majesty has done me the kindness of calling me uncle," I said. "Though I am not a full uncle, I must still live up to the title."

My nephew the emperor seemed greatly affected by this. A great change came over his eyes and his expression as he looked at me. Afterward he said many things to me, mostly concerning memories of his childhood. He spoke of going to play at

Huai Manor, spoke of the youthful exploits of Prince Dai and the others. It was not until night had fallen that I was able to take my leave.

Before I left, Qizhe said, "Imperial Uncle, we will remember what you have said today."

I carried these words back home with me. Perhaps Qizhe already knew about the rebellion.

Maybe the person Qizhe had spoken of hesitating about was me.

Back at the manor, I was surprised to see the imperial chancellor's sedan.

So Liu Tongyi had yet to succeed in enlightening Han Si. I went around to the rear courtyard to assess the situation and met Liu Tongyi coming from the other direction, having just finished his counseling.

In the lamplight Liu Tongyi looked exhausted. It was clear that he had found persuading Han Si very hard going.

I asked whether Chancellor Liu had succeeded. Liu Tongyi put his hands to his temples and shook his head. I had gotten a taste of the extent of Han Si's stubbornness the day before and instantly felt a kind of professional sympathy toward Liu Tongyi. Therefore, I earnestly asked him to stay to eat and catch his breath before he left.

Liu Tongyi tactfully refused. He seemed to be in a hurry to get home and go straight to sleep to recover his strength, so I didn't insist.

The next day, a pigeon came from Xuzhou with a letter.

The letter contained only four words: "All has been arranged."

Reading this letter was like swallowing a balm for my mind. I immediately told a servant to invite Yun Yu. After I gave the order, I thought that was inappropriate. Every day was too frequent to invite Yun Yu. I needed to do something different.

So I called back my messenger. "This evening go to Twilight House to pick up Young Master Chu Xun. Tell him that I miss him and would like him to come play the zither here."

The messenger looked thoughtful, then grinned and accepted the order.

Then I sent another person to the Yun residence with an invitation, saying that I had offended Supervisor Yun yesterday and was inviting him to come observe the flowers and listen to zither playing tonight.

Over half a shichen later, the person who had delivered the invitation returned with Yun Yu's response; he said he would certainly come.

I had always liked Yun Yu's temperament. Once a thing was over, that was the end of it. He wouldn't dwell on it, and it wouldn't get in the way of serious business.

Toward evening, Yun Yu was the first to arrive. He behaved just as usual, as if yesterday had never happened. Taking tea, he looked around and asked me, "Where is the zither?"

I had to say, "You came ahead of it. You'll have to wait."

Yun Yu said, "I see," then said nothing else about it. I took him to an inner courtyard; wine had been laid out on the veranda above the small courtyard where my bedroom was located. The two peony plants there were in perfect bloom.

There was no zither for the present. I first poured the wine. As no one was around, I said, "Everything has been arranged in Xuzhou."

Smiling, Yun Yu said, "No wonder Your Highness wanted me to travel via Xuzhou yesterday. Your Highness holds the place in the palm of your hand." He dipped his finger in wine and dotted the table with it. "Jiangnan, Jiangbei, Huanghuai, Xinan, and Xibei have all been secured. Only Dongbei and the capital remain…" He connected the drops of wine, turning them into a nearly complete circle. He pointed to the gap. "Time to close the circle."

Yun Yu wiped away the traces of wine on the table and continued, "My father heard yesterday that Prince Zong and Prince Jia are both leaving the capital. Prince Jia seems to be headed to Xuzhou."

Xuzhou was a strategically important location in the neighborhood of the Long River and the River Huai. That was why Wang Qin and Yun Tang attached such importance to it. I said, "When Chengdian served under my father, he was in command of Deng Man for a few days."

Deng Man was deputy general to Wang Zong, commander of Xuzhou. Yun Yu said, "Presumably Prince Jia has taken those few days of command for the Total Muster Tally."

"And perhaps," I said, "he has taken Deng Man for Wang Zong."

Yun Yu chuckled.

The so-called Total Muster Tally referred to a command tally my father had used in the army. When my father had led troops in defense of the border and scored a major victory over the barbarians, the Tongguang emperor had ordered a set of flood dragon tallies forged for him. In all, one major tally and eight minor tallies had been made. The major tally could mobilize his whole army, while the eight

minor tallies could dispatch eight subordinate officers.

By the Yingchang emperor's time, most of the young generals and field officers who had served under my father had become high generals with authority over an entire region and large forces under their command, so members of the loyalist party, concerned for the nation and the people, said to the Yingchang emperor that Prince Huai's flood dragon tally could now muster nearly all the military forces of the empire. That was when people began to speak of the Total Muster Tally.

As a child I played with this legendary set of tallies quite a bit, and even used them to dig up anthills. To use my mother's turn of phrase, deep down my father was still a spoiled little prince; he was always going around dropping things and forgetting things, with no concept of the value of his possessions. When he wasn't at war, he would often leave that set of tallies here, there, and everywhere, then go searching for them all over the place when it came time to use them, putting his servants in a state of panic. The flood dragon on the major tally my father was meant to keep on his person at all times even had one blunted horn from the time I used it to pry stones out of a rockery.

I had brought the flood dragon tally with the blunted horn to my father. He looked around while putting the tally away. With one hand stroking my head and the other covering my mouth, he whispered, "Don't tell your mother."

It felt as if it was only yesterday. At the time, my father and I had been precisely where Yun Yu and I were sitting now.

Yun Yu said, "Your Highness, how long are we going to sit here? When will the zither be here?"

True, the evening glow had nearly faded. Why had Chu Xun not come yet?

The corners of Yun Yu's mouth quirked up. "So it is Chu Xun's playing Your Highness invited me to listen to. You have not gone to see him recently. Perhaps he will not come today because he's mad at you."

My face spasmed helplessly. I was just about to speak when a servant came to announce that Chu Xun was finally here.

After all this time, Chu Xun seemed all right. He came over with his zither in his arms and bowed. "So Your Highness wishes me to play for Supervisor Yun."

When he had put his zither on the stand and was tuning it, a servant came again to announce that Chancellor Liu was here.

Holding his wine cup, Yun Yu smiled and said, "The full complement today."

I coughed and said, "Chancellor Liu is here in accordance with an imperial edict to persuade Han Si." He had not succeeded yesterday, so now that he was finished with today's work, he had to come over to keep persuading.

As I was serving wine here, it was only reasonable for me to invite Chancellor Liu to join us, just as it was only reasonable for him to send me word that he had come to counsel Han Si.

I told Chief Steward Cao to say to Liu Tongyi that I was in the rear courtyard enjoying the flowers and listening to the zither, and would Chancellor Liu be so kind as to join me for a drink.

Chief Steward Cao went to obey the order. Soon after, as Yun Yu was holding back his sleeve to pour wine, the sound of footsteps approached. I looked up and saw a green robe. Next to Chief Steward Cao—was Liu Tongyi.

Chu Xun knelt, and Yun Yu stood to bow. Liu Tongyi said, "Imperial orders compel me to come here again to disturb Your Highness and Supervisor Yun as you enjoy the flowers and partake of wine. I hope that I have not spoiled the mood."

Smiling, I said, "Of course not, it is my great fortune that I can use this coincidence to invite Chancellor Liu to join us."

Another place had already been laid out for him to sit. I raised a hand and invited Liu Tongyi to take it. Liu Tongyi sat and drank a cup of wine, then stood and bade farewell. "I really am compelled by imperial orders. I cannot delay. Permit me to take my leave."

"Chancellor Liu is under imperial orders and dares not stay long," Yun Yu said, "but since we are here to enjoy the flowers and listen to the zither, you should at least hear a song before you go."

I joined in asking him to stay, and Chu Xun also said, "I have not yet had the honor to perform before the imperial chancellor. I have long heard of Imperial Chancellor Liu's knowledge of music. Perhaps it will be possible for you to give me a few pointers today."

With a helpless smile, Liu Tongyi said, "In that case, I will snatch a few more moments of leisure."

Yun Yu filled his wine cup. Chu Xun played a song as cheerful as running water. When it was over, Liu Tongyi said with a smile, "You are skilled indeed."

"The Imperial Chancellor flatters me," said Chu Xun respectfully.

Suddenly Yun Yu said, "I have always heard that Chancellor Liu is a fine musician, but after all these years serving together at court, I have yet to experience it. Now that we are all assembled, if Chancellor Liu were willing to play a duet with

Young Master Chu Xun, that would be a most uncommon display of elegance."

I was a little startled. Chu Xun said with a smile, "Supervisor Yun is so funny. How could the imperial chancellor play a duet with me?"

Yun Yu raised his eyebrows and said, "I was only joking. Nothing for Chancellor Liu to take seriously."

This seemed half joke and half challenge. I was just about to say something to get Liu Tongyi out of it when Liu Tongyi himself smiled calmly and said, "I'm afraid of embarrassing myself in front of Young Master Chu. I would never dare to play the zither." He turned to me. "Does Your Highness have a flute here?"

I stared blankly, then quickly sent for one to be found.

Luckily, while I knew nothing of musical instruments, I still kept some at home for the sake of appearances. Chief Steward Cao led the search himself. After a long moment, he returned with a transverse flute of green jade and presented it to Liu Tongyi.

Liu Tongyi took it and said, "If you insist," and Chu Xun once again pushed back his sleeves and strummed the strings of his zither. Its sound was like a rush of cool spring water. Liu Tongyi put the flute to his lips. A thread of melody like a slow evening breeze winding amid the clouds raised ripples on the spring.

The evening glow was gone, leaving an ink-blue sky. The stars twinkled into view. Beyond the veranda, the twilight was profound, the flowers lavishly colored. There was nothing but the leisurely evening breeze and the wine in my cup, as limpid as spring water.

Yun Yu and I leaned back in our chairs, holding our wine cups. Amid the music of the flute and the melody of the zither, I was not intoxicated, yet I felt myself become so.

At this moment, everything was like a drunken dream amid the dim twilight and the scent of flowers. It made one unwilling to wake.

But however unwilling, the time to leave the dream would always come. The flute meandered to a stop, and the zither ended. Yun Yu clapped and said, "Now that I have heard Chancellor Liu play, it will be three years before I dare listen to anyone else play the flute."

"That is excessive praise, Supervisor Yun," Liu Tongyi said modestly. He drank another cup, then stood and said, "I truly cannot delay any longer. Your Highness, I will take my leave."

I watched that daub of pale green leave the courtyard. In the past, I might have been doomed to spend this night tossing and turning, unable to fall asleep. Nor had

I been sleeping very well lately. Only now, it was a different person keeping me from my slumbers.

When it was time for the night watches to begin, the influence of the wine had dispersed. Yun Yu said he was tired and went home to sleep, and Chu Xun, holding his zither, asked to leave as well.

I saw Yun Yu off, ate a light snack, then went to bathe. After bathing, I remembered abruptly that Liu Tongyi had not yet come to say goodbye, so I called a servant over to the veranda and asked, "When did Chancellor Liu leave?"

The page who answered said, "Your Highness, the chancellor is still in the small hall talking to Han Si."

He hadn't finished yet?

So I strolled over to the small hall to look. When I reached the door, I happened to see Han Si kneeling and touching his head to the ground. "Thank you, Chancellor, thank you, Chancellor."

"No need," said Liu Tongyi. "I will inform His Majesty tomorrow. Everything I promised you will be done."

It seemed that Liu Tongyi had at last prevailed. I stepped aside to stand on the veranda. Soon after, Liu Tongyi came out. I said, "You have truly been overtaxed lately, Chancellor Liu. Even such matters require your personal intervention."

In the lamplight, Liu Tongyi's features were veiled with weariness. "It is my duty."

As to how he had finally convinced Han Si, he had not yet reported to Qizhe, so he could not say, and I did not ask. Liu Tongyi was about to take his leave when I interjected, "You've spent all this time talking, Chancellor Liu. Have a cup of tea before you go."

Liu Tongyi and I entered the front hall together. When tea was brought, I said to him, "The tea kept ready here at night is always weak, with a couple of leaves floating in it for flavor. I worry I won't be able to sleep if the tea is strong. I don't know whether you will enjoy it."

"I do always stay up late and often drink strong tea," Liu Tongyi said. "But weak tea is more suitable at night."

"While you are kept busy by affairs of state, you should still look after your health and go to sleep earlier. While you may not feel it now, if you are always expending your energy, over time it will damage your health."

Liu Tongyi thanked me with a smile, and I smiled as well and said, "I've inadvertently overstepped. It is a frequent problem I have. Please don't be offended, Chancellor Liu."

I deliberately changed the subject. "My habits of going to bed early and drinking weak tea were forced on me in my youth. My father liked to drink strong tea and potent wine, and my mother would not let him. The only thing to drink here at night was weak tea. I was ordered to go to bed as soon as the night watches began. I even imitated the ancients. On summer nights, I caught fireflies and kept them in gauze bags, hiding them inside my bed curtains and reading romances in secret. Though they weren't very effective, as they didn't give enough light."

"Yes," said Liu Tongyi, "and there are no heavy quilts in summer, so their light is hard to hide. I made do with moonlight to read, which was tiring for the eyes, and cold in winter, so I couldn't read anymore. Or else I removed the cover of a serious book and stuck it to the novel. Unfortunately, it was hard to make it stick to the binding."

"That's because you were too well-behaved," I said with a smile. "I went right to the bookbindery to have the books bound and spent a little extra to have them made to look like the *Six Secret Teachings* or the *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* or some other books on warcraft. Even so, I was caught because the books were suspiciously new."

Liu Tongyi laughed softly. "My luck was a little better. My methods could not match up to Your Highness's, but I never got caught."

"That was because you were good at learning your lessons, so no one would suspect you," I said. "When I was little, my father made me read books on warcraft. He was stricter with me than any new soldier he trained."

My father had once hoped that I would be like him, serve the court, expand the borders, defend our existing territory, and gallop through the passes. In bygone days I had been forced to read books of warcraft, forced to practice the horse stance. I had even toyed with spear craft for a few days.

Truly, the past did not bear thinking of.

I went on, "But later I was left to do whatever I liked."

Once, I had been beaten and scolded into studying warcraft and martial arts. When no one was there to compel me or mind me, the very first thing I felt was unbearable emptiness.

Alas, the past is as fleeting as clouds.

Liu Tongyi said, "When I was little, I was in such a hurry to have no one to stop me from reading novels, but now that I can read them openly, I rarely feel as much interest as I did when I was young. Though no life can be perfect, when I occasionally recall my youth, the joys still outweigh the bitterness."

"You always speak so sensibly, Chancellor Liu," I praised him.

Smiling, Liu Tongyi said, "Perhaps I have not yet regained my wits after all that counseling. Your Highness must find it funny." He drank some more tea, put down his teacup, and stood. "I have disturbed you long enough. I really must take my leave now."

It was nearly the second watch of the night and much too late, so I made no more polite suggestions that he stay. I stood and saw Liu Tongyi out of the front hall.

For some days after, nothing of import took place.

Qizhe did not summon me to the palace. I only went on the Dragon Boat Festival, bearing a gift for the holiday. None of my older royal cousins had come, but my nephews were there in plenty. I sat down to a celebratory banquet in the palace, ate two zongzi, and drank some cups of realgar wine with a whole crowd, after which I received no imperial command to keep me back for a private audience. I went home after the banquet ended.

The next day, the sixth day of the fifth month, I received more news. I spent a long time deliberating on a course of action, then finally wrote a note to Yun Yu. When Yun Yu came, once we came to a place where we could talk privately, he asked whether I had received certain word from Dongbei.

I said that, reasonably speaking, everything ought to be settled in Dongbei, but I had not actually received word of it. I told Yun Yu that I had asked him here for a different reason.

The day was sunny and windless. A dry, dense heat had settled in the gazebo. I hesitated briefly, then asked Yun Yu, "Suiya, about the valley in Xinan… do you truly refuse to consider it?"

Yun Yu was fanning himself. When he heard this, he looked at me. I saw something a little strange in his eyes and expression. He had just said "Your Highness, I…" when my mind spun out of control. I cut him off and blurted out, "Suiya, I'm going to tell you the truth. I—I love you."

Yun Yu, gripping his folding fan, looked at me. The fan did not move. His eyes did not move. His expression did not move. Altogether, he did not move.

I had not planned on saying this, but I'd had a sudden feeling that if I did not say it now, I would never have another chance.

There were many things I wanted to say, yet it also seemed I had nothing to say. My speech faltered. Hesitating again, I said, "Suiya, I only told you to go because I didn't want you to be in danger. I—I would sooner kill myself than harbor any ulterior motive. Suiya…"

Yun Yu finally moved. He folded his fan. The corners of his mouth quirked up, and he laughed. "Your Highness has spoken of love to many people, and finally my turn has come."

And just like that, there was absolutely nothing I could say.

And it was true that I had said the same recently to Ransi. I had said these words to two people in total, once to Ransi, once to Yun Yu.

I had always longed for Ransi, but the Ransi I had longed for was not the real Liu Tongyi□ but a mirage floating among the clouds, something I had drawn in my mind.

Only when I woke from the dream did I understand what was really good for me.

Looking back over these past years, the one who had joined me in drinking and diversions, who had talked to me and teased me, was Yun Yu. No one had ever been so close to me before. Now there was only Yun Yu, and perhaps there would never be anyone else.

Sadly, even this truth was a sham. If I had not joined the rebellion under false pretenses, Yun Yu would not have gotten close to me. One might also say that I had tricked Yun Yu into friendship.

After the fifteenth day of the fifth month, it was bound to all be gone.

I couldn't think for the moment about what would come after, but I would rather have died myself than seen Yun Yu killed.

Yun Yu was still smiling. In a careless tone, he said, "Your Highness, with major events ahead of us, let us put aside other matters until we can return to them later. I have always said that, while it was fate that made me choose this path, I chose it willingly. Now that I am on it, I will follow it to the end. It has nothing to do with anyone else. I will always follow Your Highness. I hope Your Highness will soon ascend the throne and command the empire. And I hope that when that time comes, Your Majesty will not forget the loyalty my father and I have shown today."

The words "Your Majesty" stabbed my ears like needles.

Yun Yu laughed again. "When that time comes, naturally the harem will be full of beauties of all kinds, and I will not join in to dance attendance and add my own contribution."

This stabbed my ears even harder. Even if I said to Yun Yu, *There could be no one but you*, he wouldn't believe me.

It was true that if I had him, there could have been no one else.

Now I felt as if I was being boiled in a pot of oil in hell, but no one understood.

I clutched Yun Yu's sleeve. "Suiya, though what I have said today is absurd, it is what I truly feel. I, Jing Weiyi, may not be a good man, but to me, there is nothing to compare to you."

Yun Yu looked at me. Soon, he chuckled again. "Your Highness is going to make me cry. Do you want to speak to Chancellor Liu again? Are you practicing your performance on me first?"

I sheepishly released his sleeve. I had been holding on tight, and it was hot. I had broken out in a damp sweat all over, even in the palm of my hand.

I coughed softly and said with a sheepish smile, "Perhaps it is just hot today, and I am dizzy from the heat."

Yun Yu looked at me earnestly and said, "Then Your Highness ought to rest. The great event is before us. You must look after your health." He bowed slightly. "If there is nothing else, permit me to take my leave."

When he turned and left, it made a small breeze. Before I could determine whether it was warm or cool, it was gone.

I strolled back and forth a little in the gazebo, almost letting out a bitter laugh.

It was a good thing that Yun Yu had taken it like this. I had understood him at Yuehua Pavilion. His behavior now meant he was past it. This was how it ought to have been all along.

Only it seemed I really was not fated to love anyone. First it was Ransi, now Yun Yu.

The person who had been closest to me was also growing distant.

Yun Yu was unwilling to leave, but I still had methods available to me. The present situation was not one to weep over.

Beneath the stagnant water, hidden currents and violent rapids massed. The waves were about to rise.

Yun Yu came again, only to discuss everyone's movements with me.

On the eighth day of the fifth month, provincial governments and military barracks everywhere were poised for action. The Wang and Yun clans had been operating for many years. The depth to which their roots were entrenched and the breadth to which their branches and leaves spread far outstripped my imagination. North, south, east, and west, each prefecture and every province—in virtually all parts of the nation, they had someone they could command. A partition existed between the empire's civil and military officials, so they could not interfere with each other. I had thought that Wang Qin and Yun Tang had mainly civil officials at their disposal. I was slowly realizing now that they could mobilize many soldiers as well.

This spate of uprooting would open up so many fine vacancies from the court to the local governments. I did not know whether the Ministry of Justice's prison would be able to hold all of those who vacated them.

On the twelfth day of the fifth month, I showed Wang Xuan a tally. I figured that Yun Tang and Wang Qin would be too delighted to sleep that night.

That tally commanded twenty thousand mounted imperial guards in the vicinity of the capital.

Ten thousand palace guards and twenty thousand mounted guards defended the capital. The palace guards could only be mobilized with the emperor's seal, but the twenty thousand mounted guards were under joint control by the commander in chief, the minister of war, and a number of other officials in important military posts. The Minister of War and Commander in Chief Li Jian each had half of an emergency tally that could make up a whole. In an emergency situation, that tally could temporarily mobilize the whole force.

At the end of the fourteenth day of the fifth month, the night sky was wide, the stars were bright, and the moon was just a sliver from full. When the night watches began, Huai Manor was very quiet. The whole capital must have been very quiet.

I did not know how many pairs of eyes, like mine, were watching the moon, waiting for the new day to begin at the Hour of the Rat.

Chapter Six

At the Hour of the Rat, I saw a firework go up in the southeast of the capital.

This was the signal to begin.

According to my arrangements with Yun Tang and Wang Qin, at the Hour of the Rat, with fireworks as a signal, Minister of War Cheng Bo and Yun Tang's nephew Yun Huan would head ten thousand soldiers as they took the area around the capital. Li Jian and Wang Xuan would lead ten thousand more into the city and join Wang Qin's three thousand palace guards.

It was precisely because of those three thousand palace soldiers that I had made use of the twenty thousand mounted guards at the risk of being implicated.

I really had no idea what kind of foolishness that idiot woman the empress dowager had been getting up to these last few years. Before Qizhe's personal rule had begun, she had outwardly yielded to me and the other old imperial uncles while secretly excluding us. She took those of us with the surname Jing to be untrustworthy and had assumed she could rely upon those with her own family name. And that old goose Prince Jia was steadfast to a fault; he'd put on a spectacle of loyalty at a critical juncture. He had only three thousand palace guards under his command, and after his squabble with this house sparrow, he transferred his power over those three thousand to the empress dowager, resigned his post, and went home to write poetry.

Neither side gained by his action. He had wept bloody tears of indignation, and I'd spat blood from an internal wound.

To no one's great surprise, when it came time for Qizhe to take up the reins of power, those three thousand palace guards were seized by the empress dowager's family and did not come under Qizhe's control. The empress dowager's family, like herself, had neither the moral fiber to be loyal nor the wit to be traitors. Those guards became Wang Qin's for the taking.

As thirty thousand soldiers were stationed in the capital, three thousand palace guards were insufficient to take the palace easily. So Yun Tang and Wang Qin had held out for many years.

Minister of War Cheng Bo was leaving office and retiring at the end of the year. Li Jian would also be transferred elsewhere.

Those who had done battle alongside my father and lived through the reign of three emperors were all now getting on in years.

To the court and the people, it was a blessing that there had been no war for many years. The sole modest drawback was that conditions did not exist to create a general to whose command tens of thousands of soldiers would willingly submit.

With Cheng Bo and Li Jian respectively retiring and leaving, it was truly hard to say whose hands command over the mounted guards would fall into. Even I had heard it said that the minor military officials were always locked in combat with each other, and it was a good thing Li Jian was there to keep control of the situation.

The worst outcome was that his successor would fail to keep control, and true power would ebb away bit by bit, creating an opportunity for others to exploit.

Yun Tang and Wang Qin's years of patient waiting had been in expectation of just this opportunity.

Grand Tutor Yun's pupils could be found throughout the court and the commons. There was little overlap in the scope of authority of civil and military officials, which made it convenient for them to cooperate; everyone who had ever served in an official capacity understood this. If Yun Tang's pupils colluded with the minor military officials, in the future it might mean not merely three thousand palace guards, but soldiers numbering in the tens of thousands.

Although, to Yun Tang and Wang Qin, this game piece posed no small danger.

So, with Cheng Bo and Li Jian's unwillingness to hand over power as a pretext, I had used the near certainty of taking those twenty thousand mounted troops as bait; Yun Tang and Wang Qin were naturally beside themselves with joy.

According to our arrangements, with ten thousand mounted guards and three thousand palace guards acting together inside and out, at the Hour of the Ox, I would arrive in front of the palace, lead an assault, capture Qizhe, and seize the throne.

It was more than halfway to the Hour of the Ox, past midnight. I was fully dressed, prepared to go out.

What Yun Tang and Wang Qin did not know was that at this very moment, the officials who had been ready to rise in answer to this rebellion would already be bound or executed. During the banquet for the Dragon Boat Festival, numerous

princes had been absent because they had already left the capital. Only Prince Zong would be left. The list I had given Yun Tang and Wang Qin of people to join in the conspiracy contained nothing but ministers who were loyal heart and soul.

The emperor and empress dowager should not have doubted me so much, and Yun Tang and Wang Qin should not have thought so highly of me.

Total Muster Tally? Secret power? It was all fake. In reality I was empty-handed. I hadn't a shred of power. I'd had to ask for favors, get help to make this happen.

What these people had sworn to serve with loyalty unto death was not my departed father, and not any military tally, but the empire of the Jing family and its lasting peace.

I was now to go openly to meet Yun Tang and Wang Qin. I would have to carry on the performance of rebellion a little longer.

I changed into a casual robe, hung a sword from my belt, and led a group to the rear courtyard, ready to mount and head out. Suddenly, a series of thumps came from atop the rear courtyard wall, and a few people tumbled down.

My attendants drew their weapons. From the shadow at the base of the wall came a weak voice: "Your Highness."

It was Yun Yu's voice. I stepped forward quickly. Yun Yu's face was sickly pale in the moonlight. My heart tightened, and I hastily said, "Suiya?"

Yun Yu had a hand pressed to his left arm. Softly, he said, "Your Highness, I am afraid things have gone awry."

Gone awry? I distinctly recalled arranging with Prince Zong that the time to act would be when we rushed the palace, when Yun Tang and the others were all out in the open. Why had things gone awry now? Had Li Jian been too impetuous?

Yun Yu laughed bitterly. "Perhaps… information got out through the imperial guards… In the palace and the city… there were ambushes laid… As for the mounted guards, they too…"

It appeared that Qizhe had made his own provisions in addition to Prince Zong's.

"The situation is hopeless," Yun Yu said slowly. "There is no chance of success. Those are all Jing Qizhe's men outside."

"Grand Tutor Yun and Wang Qin…?" I asked.

Yun Yu said nothing.

The faint sounds of fighting outside the walls gradually intensified. Yun Yu laughed very softly. "I never thought Your Highness and I really would die together."

I grabbed hold of his sleeve. “Not necessarily.”

Pulling Yun Yu after me, I hastened onto the floating walkway leading to the waterside pavilion.

I had left all the manor’s people in the courtyard to put up a show of resistance. In the silence, there was only myself and Yun Yu.

In the waterside pavilion, I groped in the dark and took two lanterns from a bookshelf. I got out a fire stick and lit one of them, passed it to Yun Yu, then pushed the bookshelf. With a creak, a trapdoor opened.

Holding the lantern, Yun Yu stood at the edge of the trapdoor. “So Your Highness was prepared.”

“How could I do a risky thing like this without leaving myself an escape?” I said.

Carrying the other lantern, I slowly went down a flight of earthen steps into the opening. Yun Yu followed me. I flipped a mechanism on the right-hand wall, closing the trapdoor.

The long flight of steps extended downward. Taking the stairs for long periods was difficult for me. Taking them one step at a time, the descent was interminable. Yun Yu said, “Do these stairs go to the bottom of the lake?”

“Precisely,” I said.

When we came down the final step, ahead of us was a winding path, so dark it seemed to have no end.

At a bend in the passage, I picked up a bundle. “This contains water, dry provisions, and money. We’ll go slowly. The path is a long one.”

Yun Yu hardly said a word the whole way.

The other lantern had to be kept in reserve, and the single burning one wasn’t very bright. It only lit the path a few paces ahead. The swaying flame made the shadows sway as well. The sound of our breathing was unusually clear.

Yun Yu’s left arm had been injured and hastily bandaged. Blood was still seeping through the bandages.

I didn’t know what to say to him. Anything I said would be false.

I very much wanted to ask Yun Yu why he had come to me. Yun Tang and Wang Qin must also have left themselves means of escape. Since Yun Yu had been able to flee, why would he have come to Huai Manor?

Originally, I had planned to use this passage after I had met Yun Tang and the others and left to Prince Zong the righteous work of eradicating the rebels. I would

feign flight, taking Yun Yu with me by this path.

After walking for some unknown length of time, Yun Yu's footsteps faded. I asked if he was tired, and Yun Yu nodded. He lowered himself to the ground, supporting himself with his right arm. In the lamplight, he bent his head and closed his eyes.

I was concerned that he had other injuries besides the one to his arm. I took his hand and felt his pulse.

Yun Yu opened his eyes. "Your Highness knows how to take a pulse?"

"At least I should be able to tell if it's strong or weak, fast or slow," I said.

Yun Yu laughed softly and pulled his hand away.

I looked for something else to say to him. "I've only taken this path once. It really feels as if it never ends."

"Just as well if it doesn't," Yun Yu said calmly.

I looked intently at him. Yun Yu turned his eyes to look at me. "Is Your Highness afraid that Jing Qizhe's men will find this place and come after us?"

He closed his eyes again. He seemed weary. "Just as well if they do."

After a brief rest, we continued on ahead. I told Yun Yu the history of this secret passage in fits and starts.

An ancestor of my father's mother's family, that is to say of my great-grandfather, had made his living as a bricklayer. This ancestor had saved enough money that he was able to contribute in a famine year to secure his family rights to a bureaucratic post. Unexpectedly, among his descendants, a scholar did emerge to succeed in the imperial examinations. Gradually, his descendants took on more and more important positions until my great-grandfather's day; he obtained a government position very much in line with his ancestral occupation—Minister of Revenue.

My great-grandfather was a timid and cautious man. He thought that having risen to this post, with his daughter in the palace as a consort, his family's fortunes had reached their peak, and after this would come the so-called decline following prosperity. In order to keep the family line from ending, he wanted to create an escape route.

Though his way of creating an escape route was rather a little unusual. He drew an architectural plan himself and began work on excavating this secret passage.

First, he dug a big lake in his rear courtyard. At the heart of the lake, he built an island. Then he had the secret passage travel under the lake to leave the manor.

This secret passage was very long, and it had to be built in secret. He anonymously purchased some houses along the planned route. At different times, he brought in groups of workers to dig in each house. The diggers thought it was an ordinary tunnel and had no idea where it led. When the passage was finally complete, he had the holes in those houses filled in. Only the exit and the entrance on the island in the center of the lake remained.

Digging this passage was very hard going. The work was only finished after he passed. When my father's maternal uncle resigned his post and retired to the country, he left the house to my father. It was then expanded and renovated into Huai Manor.

This was a long story. I told it in snatches and bursts. Occasionally we stopped to rest our feet and drink a bit of water, eat a few bites.

When I finished the story, I guessed that we should be close to the exit.

Sure enough, after a few more turns, the clay brick walls on either side gave way to limestone brick, and the passage narrowed until it was just wide enough for a single person to pass. After another two or three turns, it abruptly opened out again.

Yun Yu hoisted the lantern to illuminate our surroundings. He and I were standing in a square stone room with faint writing on one wall.

"I don't suppose Your Highness's great-grandfather left behind a treasure map or a tell-all," said Yun Yu. He went to the wall and lifted the lantern to look. The writing was coated with dust but still legible.

There were two lines of writing carved into the wall.

The first was written in a beautiful, free-flowing hand. It said: *The world is wide. Freedom lies beyond.* It must have been written by my great-grandfather or great-uncle.

The other line was strong and vigorous. *Those who make use of this room must reflect, be chastened, and strive for better.* I knew at a glance that this handwriting belonged to my father, the previous Prince Huai.

I reached out to press down on the stone table at the center of the room. The part of the wall with the writing about the wide world slowly revolved like a door, revealing a gap.

Yun Yu and I passed through the stone door together. Before us was another passage. I shut the door and said to Yun Yu, "Now there is no turning back, even if we wanted to. The doors in this tunnel, except for the one in the waterside pavilion, only open one way."

At the end of the passage was a flight of steps, winding up.

At the top of these was another room. I flipped the mechanism and pushed open the hidden door in the wall. When we stepped out, the stone door rumbled closed behind us. Above our heads came the sound of flapping wings; this seemed to be made by bats and some variety of large moth.

Ahead of us was the hazy gleam of moonlight.

This was a cave halfway up a small mountain near the capital. Holding Yun Yu by the sleeve, I left the cave. It was still dark. The lantern flame attracted winged insects and moths, which clustered around it. As soon as we left the mouth of the cave, Yun Yu extinguished the lantern.

I took him by a small path skirting a cliff face. By moonlight, the way was just visible. At the end of the cliff face, the path zigzagged straight up, narrow and precipitous. One had to choose one's steps carefully, but one could not be too slow. It took us high up. When we looked back at the capital, half the sky was glowing a dim fiery red.

I did not know what the situation was there, whether the emperor had purged Yun Tang, Wang Qin, and the other rebels, whether he had sent soldiers in pursuit of Yun Yu. My servants only knew that I had taken Yun Yu to an inner courtyard, but a number of attendants had been keeping an eye on the people who had come with Yun Yu. They likely had no idea that I had taken him to the waterside pavilion. Even if someone guessed there was a secret passage in Huai Manor, it would still take time to search for it.

I did not know whether Prince Zong had reported my part in this to Qizhe. Probably he would have a hard time explaining why I had run away with Yun Yu.

The fact that I was a spy was known only to Prince Zong.

I had no power of my own, no basis on which to plot with Yun Yang and Wang Qin. I'd had to rely on outside help.

But Qizhe of all people couldn't know about it. There were too many eyes and ears in the palace; something would get out. I had to go to Prince Zong.

None of my father's old comrades-in-arms liked me. They thought I had thoroughly disgraced the title of Prince Huai. If I said a rebellion was brewing, they wouldn't believe me; but they would accord Prince Zong a certain degree of deference. If Prince Zong investigated the ins and outs of the rebellion, they would believe it.

Outwardly, Prince Zong would act, deliberate with the emperor and the honest officials on how to quell the internal strife; but in secret, I would be the one really

taking action.

In borrowing those twenty thousand mounted guards, I had taken a particular risk.

Cheng Bo and Li Jian were both devoted heart and soul to the emperor; no one but Qizhe could mobilize those twenty thousand mounted guards. But I needed them to lure out Yun Tang and Wang Qin. For lack of other options, I had to say to Prince Zong, *Go report to His Majesty that Prince Huai wants to usurp the throne and intends to take Huai Manor's military tally to Cheng Bo and Li Jian, and would His Majesty please order Cheng Bo and Li Jian to play along for the moment.*

Originally, I could have demonstrated my innocence by changing sides at the last moment when it came time for the assault on the palace. But now, in order to protect Yun Yu, I had to set all that aside for the moment.

At the end of the path was the mountaintop, and on the mountaintop was a thatched cottage.

I opened the door to the cottage, then felt around and pulled a wooden box out from under the bed facing the door. To Yun Yu I said, "There are clothes, shoes, and supplies here. Take the path down the mountain, and there will be a place to buy horses by the roadside."

In a calm voice, Yun Yu said, "Where will we be met?"

I took out a map and put it in Yun Yu's hands. "Follow the route on this map. It will be hard for the emperor's soldiers to pursue you. You can keep this."

Yun Yu folded up the map and put it away.

Then I took out a jade pendant and gave it to him too. "When you reach Xuzhou, there will be someone to meet you. Go to Yuan Alley and find Yuan San's wineshop. You'll have to produce this jade token in order to get to the place in Xinan."

Yun Yu put the jade pendant away too.

"Get changed," I said, "I'll go have a look around."

I left the cottage and stood at the cliff edge. To the east there was already a faint burst of blue. Soon it would be daybreak.

I was deliberating whether I ought to go with Yun Yu, or stay.

Sooner or later, Yun Yu had to know that I was a spy. I couldn't bear to think about how he would take it when he found out.

I only wished to keep him safe as long as I lived, whether he hated me or wanted to kill me.

I had done what I had to as a loyal courtier. The throne was Qizhe's, and so was the empire.

To the best of my ability, I had done right by Qizhe.

Now there was no one in my heart but Suiya.

I heard footsteps behind me. I looked back. It was Yun Yu. He hadn't changed his clothes. He came up beside me.

I frowned. "Suiya, why have you…"

Looking toward the horizon, Yun Yu said, "Too bad that this effort fell through at the last moment. I wonder when it will be possible to make another attempt."

I laughed bitterly. "I don't suppose it will ever be possible."

Yun Yu turned to look at me. "Isn't this escape route a secret game piece?"

I didn't end up telling him that I had been a spy. I only sighed and said, "I risked everything on this single throw, committed all my people. This escape route was only meant to save my life."

I looked at him with profound intensity. "Suiya, would you be willing from here on out to live with me, as ordinary commoners, secluded from the world?"

Yun Yu looked again at the horizon. With a soft sigh, he said, "My thanks to Your Highness for the favor you have shown me, but I…"

I was just about to tell him there was no reason to be so formal, when suddenly Yun Yu moved. There was a flash of light in front of my eyes as a sword wrapped in the cool, thin air of dawn came to a halt next to my neck.

I froze. Firelight blazed up all around me.

Behind the cottage and among the trees, countless torches seemed to light up in an instant, and countless clusters of black figures appeared as if through stagecraft. In the blink of an eye, they had me and Yun Yu surrounded.

In the wind on the mountaintop, Yun Yu's sleeve flew upward as his hand held the sword. The armed soldiers parted, and two people slowly emerged from the crowd. One, dressed in imperial robes, with the imperial crown on his head, was my nephew Qizhe. The other, wearing a dark blue robe of office, his expression calm, was Liu Tongyi.

I heard Liu Tongyi's voice say, "Rebel prince Jing Weiyi, there is no escape. Submit and be apprehended."

Qizhe looked my way with inexplicable apprehension and concern in his eyes.

Could it be that Yun Yu had realized I was a spy, and in order to protect me, Qizhe and Ransi were putting on an act?

My hand moved of its own accord. Then I heard Qizhe blurt something out apprehensively—

"A-Yu, look out!"

My vision blurred.

Among the crowd, I could not find Prince Zong.

Yun Yu's smile was very clear in the firelight. "Your Highness Prince Huai, will you surrender yourself, or will I use my sword while you pull me over the cliff edge so we can meet our ends together?"

I had just realized that the place Yun Yu and I were standing was extremely close to the edge. If I grabbed hold of him and leapt, we would fall off the cliff together.

Qizhe slowly said, "Jing Weiyi, as you are our imperial uncle, if you surrender, we will show mercy and let you live."

The silence around us seemed to last a lifetime.

I closed my eyes and sighed. "Even an insect clings to life. I hope that Your Majesty can follow through."

I opened my eyes and said to Yun Yu, "Supervisor Yun, it is very dangerous for us to stand so close to the edge. If one of us loses his footing, we'll go plummeting down. My death would be more than merited, but the account does not balance with you added in. Let us back away a little. If His Majesty does not trust me, he can order a soldier to come forward and bind me. Then Supervisor Yun can lower his sword."

There was another silence. Then two of the soldiers dashed forward and bound me tightly. The sword was finally lowered.

I saw Yun Yu toss the sword away and turn toward the crowd. Qizhe took a step forward. In the firelight, their eyes met.

The expression on Yun Yu's face and in his eyes changed. I had never seen him with such an expression.

Qizhe took another step forward. "A-Yu, is your arm wounded?"

He raised his hand. Yun Yu took a step back and looked at him. The firelight shone in his eyes. Then he cast down his gaze. "Your Majesty, I have done all that I promised to do. I hope that Your Majesty will also remember what you once promised me."

Qizhe looked into his eyes. "We never go back on our promises. We promised you that we would not kill Yun Tang."

We're in public, and you two are making eyes at each other. Shouldn't you show a little restraint?

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Yun Yu. "As the son of a treasonous minister, would it not be appropriate by law for me to be taken to the Ministry of Justice's prison to await trial as well?"

Qizhe sighed. "Why must you always be so…" Perhaps it would have been unsuitable for him to finish this lament in front of so many people. He swallowed it, then said, "It is through your contribution that the rebel prince Jing Weiyi has been apprehended. We have always been fair in meting out reward and punishment."

"It was Chancellor Liu's stratagem," said Yun Yu. "I would not dare claim all the credit for myself."

The firelight, the soldiers, and myself, all relegated to a secondary position, seemed a little superfluous.

Qizhe turned and looked at me. He frowned. "Jing Weiyi, we have never understood why you would rebel. Even if your rebellion succeeded, according to the traditional strictures handed down from our ancestors, you would be unable to occupy the throne with your physical defect."

"In this world, the victor is king. There are no definite strictures to obey. As for the traditional stricture that one with a physical defect cannot be emperor, if the ancients could decide it, why can it not be changed today? Why can a cripple like me not be emperor?"

Qizhe raised his eyebrows. "You have always thought very highly of yourself, Imperial Uncle."

"You are too kind, Imperial Nephew," I said.

There was a fetid chill in the Ministry of Justice's prison.

My cell was not an ordinary one. A single door led to a passage with guards stationed down its length and four cells opening onto it. I had been taken to the innermost one.

The cell was spacious enough, with a brick bed against one wall, which was fully supplied with bedding. There was a wooden table in the middle of the cell, and only a single ventilation hole in the wall. The cell had no window, so no way of telling time. An oil lamp burned, a deep yellow, shedding insufficient light.

In a corner was a commode with nothing to screen it from view. There was no way to avoid being observed during urination and bowel movements.

I had been stripped of my outer robe and dressed in prisoner's garb. My hands and feet were both fettered. The iron chains were as thick as table legs. The end of the chain from the fetters on my feet was nailed fast to the wall between the end of the bed and the commode. The length of the chain was perfectly calculated: just long enough to let me sleep, use the commode, and eat at the table. Beyond the table, it would not reach.

When I had spent about half a day in prison and the light coming through the ventilation hole was still bright, I had a visitor.

Unexpectedly, this was Chu Xun.

I hadn't thought he would come, and even be the first. I was a rebel and newly arrested. What kind of connections had he called in to come see me?

Chu Xun stood outside the bars looking at me from a distance. I stood up from the bed and walked a couple of steps forward, dragging my fetters. "A-Mi, what are you doing here? I'm a traitor now. You should go."

Chu Xun's expression was unreadable in the dim light. "Your Highness, when I look at you now, an expression comes to mind."

I stared at him. "What?"

Slowly, Chu Xun said, "Heaven's net has wide meshes, but nothing escapes it."

Chu Xun said, "Your Highness, I have told Chancellor Liu of the location in your bedroom where the secret letters and accounts are hidden, and I have given him the key. I made a mold of it when I was at the manor."

Chu Xun said, "Prince Huai, did you think I wouldn't guess who it was that forced me to enter Twilight House? Just because I refused to flatter you, with a crook of the finger, you left me no choice but to become a prostitute."

I was silent.

So this was what Chu Xun had thought all along.

"Since you guessed," I said, "would it not have been faster to kill me in bed?"

Chu Xun sneered. "How could I let you off that easy? I wanted to see you suffer the wrath of heaven, to take your just punishment! I should be dead. I should have died when I went to Twilight House. These last couple of years, I haven't considered myself a human being; I have done inhuman things. At last I've lived to see this day!"

After Chu Xun left, when the light in the ventilation hole had disappeared then returned, Qili, Qizheng, Qiqian, Qifei, and my other imperial and royal nephews came one after another to see me.

Qifei and Qitan were the first wave.

I remember that over a decade ago, just after my father's death, when I fell off a horse and broke my leg, Qitan and the other children often called out, "Lame Little Imperial Uncle! Lame Little Imperial Uncle!" and pretended to limp as they followed me around.

I was young then and couldn't help but find these sights and sounds unpleasant. My mother told me that the malice of children was innocent. Later, I went to the palace one day with an oxhorn pendant my father had brought back hanging from my belt. The little princes tailing after me eyed it avidly. While I passed down a corridor, Qitan jumped out from behind a pillar, crouched at my feet, grabbed the oxhorn pendant, and looked at me with wide eyes. "I want it."

So I untied the pendant. Qitan smiled happily, showing off a missing front tooth, and extended his hands. "Thank you, Lame Little Imperial Uncle."

I raised my hand with the pendant in it. "What did you call me?"

Qitan stood on tiptoe, desperately trying to reach high enough. Then he grabbed hold of my robe and blinked. "Thank you, Little Imperial Uncle."

I handed him the pendant. Qitan took it delightedly and even let me pat him on the head.

This was how I had bought off most of my imperial nephews bit by bit.

Now I was in the imperial prison, yet they still did not avoid me, and came to visit and called me "Imperial Uncle." Even if it was just for old times' sake, I still thought it had been worth it.

Qitan was repeatedly saying to me, "Imperial Uncle, why did you have to revolt? Why did you have to revolt…?" Over and over, countless times. He probably could not think of anything to say apart from this.

Qifei sighed and said, "After Eldest Imperial Uncle was shot with an arrow, he pleaded with His Majesty. He told my imperial brother not to kill you no matter what. The old fellow stopped a sniper's arrow for His Majesty, and the arrow was poisoned. Now his life hangs in the balance. No one knows whether he will wake. For Eldest Imperial Uncle's sake, my imperial brother will probably show you a bit of lenience…"

So that was it. Prince Zong had been shot and was unconscious. Heaven really did seem to be toying with me.

When they had been there quite some time, Qifei hesitantly stammered out, "Imperial Uncle, about Yun… and… I thought you knew."

I couldn't answer. Lowering his voice, Qifei said, "Oh, Imperial Uncle, why didn't you think? Yun Tang is the grand tutor, and Yun Yu often played with us when we were little. There was a suggestion once that Yun Yu should be my imperial brother's study companion. I think it must have been my imperial brother who brought it up. But Yun Yu is older than him, so it never panned out."

"It isn't just Imperial Uncle," said Qitan. "We played together all the time, and I had no idea. Not everyone is as perceptive as you. Now that I think about it, it's true. Those knickknacks from Imperial Uncle's house—when he presented them to our imperial brother, he gave them all to that one."

Yun Yu really had sometimes come to Huai Manor with my imperial and royal nephews in the past, but I hadn't taken much notice then. Now that I thought about it, Qizhe wasn't particularly interested in ornaments. Perhaps he was always staring at them because Yun Yu wanted them.

So it was a predestined love between innocent playmates.

We could not speak further about this, so we sat in silence awhile, and then Qifei and Qitan left. Just as he was leaving, Qitan said to me, "Imperial Uncle, my imperial brother said he won't kill you. When they question you, don't say anything. Repent sincerely. We'll plead with our imperial brother, and maybe…"

"What's done is done," I said. "It is too late to speak of repentance."

Qifei and Qitan looked at me again, then left, sighing heavily.

When the light in the ventilation hole was gone again and I was dipping dry mantou buns in water, a crowd of guards clustered around a person appeared outside the bars of my cell and opened the cell door.

I put down the dry mantou and looked up. "Chancellor Liu."

The clerk behind Liu Tongyi held a rectangular lacquer tray with brush, ink, inkstone, and a stack of paper laid out on it. Smiling, I said, "Chancellor Liu, you're having me sign my name and make my mark without interrogating me at trial?"

Liu Tongyi motioned for the clerk to set the lacquer tray on the table. The clerk withdrew from the cell along with the guards. Liu Tongyi sat down at the table across from me.

"So Chancellor Liu is planning a nocturnal interrogation of the traitor."

I put the bowl and plate on the table onto the floor, straightened my clothes, and said with a smile, "Go ahead and ask whatever you'd like, Chancellor Liu."

Liu Tongyi looked at me in the lamplight. Slowly, he said, "I could never understand why Your Highness would want to rebel."

"Chancellor Liu," I said, "ask whatever you'd like to know directly. There's no need to be too subtle. You have known about my plans for a long time. How could you have failed to guess the reason?"

He must have worked it out in order to be certain that I would rebel. He could only draw up a plan once he was certain.

When Yun Tang and Wang Qin came to me seeking a co-conspirator, when Yun Yu first approached me, Liu Tongyi was not yet imperial chancellor. Perhaps it was because of this very stratagem that he had attained his position.

Liu Tongyi said, "When Wang Qin secretly obtained command over those palace guards, His Majesty became aware of his intent to rebel. Later he found evidence that Yun Tang was also involved and intended to rope in Your Highness. I was chamberlain of the Court of Judicial Review at the time and investigated this matter at His Majesty's bidding."

"So you presented this stratagem and arranged this game, planned it for years. With Yun Yu as a game piece."

Liu Tongyi looked at me quietly. After a while, he inclined his head slightly. "Yes, having a planted agent was my decision."

I sighed and said, "If I had known of this before, when I longed for you, I ought to have washed my head, cut it off, and presented it to you on a platter. Perhaps you might have spared me a look. It would have saved many people trouble."

Liu Tongyi said nothing.

"Chancellor Liu's investigation into my hobby was very precise. Thank you for arranging to give me Chu Xun. In order to eradicate my cabal, you had Yun Yu feign friendship with me for so many years, and sent Chu Xun to Twilight House. In bed and out of bed, I have been well looked after."

Finally Liu Tongyi's expression became troubled. "I didn't send Chu Xun to you."

"*With his affections at Mount Wu engaged, what needs King Xiang in dreams to seek Jiangnan?*" I said. "Thank you for the gift of those words, Chancellor Liu."

With his affections at Mount Wu engaged, what needs King Xiang in dreams to seek Jiangnan? When he said those words to me that day in the waterside pavilion, what had Liu Tongyi's intentions been?[10]

Liu Tongyi didn't say a word. After a long moment, he finally said, "I really didn't send Chu Xun to you. Though I am not nice about my tactics, I still would not sink to such a ploy."

"It is meaningless to quibble about it now. I am a prisoner. The guilty must be punished. There is only one thing I still do not understand. How did His Majesty

and Chancellor Liu know about the exit to that secret passage?"

Liu Tongyi and Yun Yu had each gone to the waterside pavilion just once. They could not have known of the secret passage.

Liu Tongyi said that the princess had told the empress dowager about that secret passage long ago, and the empress dowager in turn had told the emperor.

So it was while the princess was brooding and having daily clandestine liaisons in the waterside pavilion that she had inadvertently discovered the secret passage. Perhaps the father of the child in the princess's belly had even escaped that way.

I sighed. "How thorough you were. There really was no escape for me."

I picked up my bowl of water from the floor and wet my throat. "Didn't you want to know why I wanted to usurp the throne? I recall telling you that in my youth I read books on warcraft, that there were high hopes placed on me. Later, I fell off a horse and broke my left leg, leaving it lame, and those hopes vanished. Everyone thought I was a hopeless case. Everyone thought that Jing Weiyi had thoroughly disgraced the title of Prince Huai. So I wanted to do something great so the whole world would know that, even with a physical defect, I could still accomplish a great task."

All that had come before stemmed from those vain delusions, the foolish conceits of a cripple. Suddenly I was a little afraid that Prince Zong would wake. In the present, at least I was a scheming prince who had made an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to usurp the throne. If the truth were revealed, what would I have left? Nothing at all. I would be a clown with nothing to my name.

I took the stack of papers and flipped through them. They were filled with criminal charges. One after another—however you looked at it, this was an unpardonable evil.

I took up the brush, dipped it in ink, and signed my full name. With my hands manacled, holding the brush was a little awkward. When I had signed, I left my fingerprint as well.

"Chancellor Liu, I have confessed everything. You can rest easy and go report the success of your mission."

Liu Tongyi stood. The clerk entered, took the confession, and lifted the tray.

Though standing, Liu Tongyi did not leave. "Does Chancellor Liu have something else to ask?" I said.

"Isn't there anything else Your Highness would like to say?" asked Liu Tongyi.

"No," I said. "I've said everything I ought to."

Liu Tongyi still did not leave. Smiling, I said, "Does Chancellor Liu think I am still concealing something? Supervisor Yun took my very last little fallback. If you do not believe that, you can go investigate."

Liu Tongyi said softly, "I didn't send Chu Xun to you, and I didn't know that Supervisor Yun was the planted agent."

What difference did it make?

"And so what if you did?" I said. "Morally speaking, in order to apprehend the rebel prince Jing Weiyi, you were perfectly justified in doing so. It was a matter of course."

Again, Liu Tongyi did not speak. At last he turned and left.

I went to lie in bed and finally ended up falling asleep. When I opened my eyes, I didn't know what time it was. I poured some water from an earthen jar and drank it. Some guards brought in a few dishes and said that Imperial Chancellor Liu had instructed that they be prepared. I was served a bowl of hot porridge and two or three side dishes, not especially fine but good enough, and all suited to my tastes.

Had I known it would be like this, I would have asked to sign the confession earlier to spare myself some meals consisting of mantou.

When I was full and sitting up in bed to digest, a number of personal guards and a jailer slowly approached my cell following someone who came to a standstill outside the bars.

It was Yun Yu.

The guards opened the cell door, and Yun Yu came in. He raised a hand to wave all his attendants out the door.

I smiled at him. "Supervisor Yun."

Yun Yu smiled too. "Has Your Highness been well?" From his tone he might have been greeting me on a regular visit to Huai Manor.

"Naturally, prison isn't as comfortable as home," I said.

Yun Yu sat on a small bench beside the table. "That's certainly frank, Your Highness."

He looked intently at me with a small smile hovering at the corners of his lips. "His Majesty has seen the confession that Your Highness signed last night."

"I see," I said.

"At the morning court assembly," said Yun Yu, "the officials earnestly requested that His Majesty put Your Highness to death. But His Majesty promised that he would spare Your Highness's life, and he is not prepared to go back on his word.

There are now two paths open to Your Highness, though that will have to wait until all matters are complete, when Prince Zong has recovered consciousness, and the valley and Xuzhou have been investigated."

Presumably Yun Yu had come today representing my nephew the emperor to tell me of those two paths and let me choose one.

Smiling, I said, "I wonder what those two paths are. What witty arrangements my imperial nephew has made, having Chancellor Liu bring me the confession and ordering Supervisor Yun to show me the way forward."

"Not so witty as Your Highness's remark," said Yun Yu. "Of the two paths, one is to send you to live in a quiet and tasteful spot, though a bit small and with rather a lot of servants, and the servants might not suit Your Highness's liking."

This was house arrest for life.

Yun Yu went on: "The second path is to ask Your Highness to reflect upon your wrongs and ultimately have a great awakening. Pufang Temple is located in the capital's suburbs. Upon entering that pure sanctuary, all your earthly burdens would be laid down."

So they wanted me to shave my head and become a monk.

"I can lay them down," I said, "but I'm afraid there will be too many young monks in the temple for the abbot to feel comfortable."

"Do not worry, Your Highness," said Yun Yu. "This temple was established especially for you. There will be no one to provoke Your Highness's worldly impulses."

This was also house arrest, just house arrest after shaving my head. I would probably have more space to roam, the run of a whole temple, instead of being locked up in a single set of rooms.

"So the choice is whether I would prefer to be able to move freely at the cost of a vegetarian diet. What a difficult decision. Permit me to consider this more carefully."

"There is no rush," said Yun Yu. "It will take some time for everything to be appropriately investigated. Your Highness can think about it."

He paused, then raised his eyebrows. "From Your Highness's witticism earlier, I take it you must be angry at me."

"No," I said sincerely.

Yun Yu's conduct toward me had been no different from mine toward him. To him, I was a traitor, and he was righteous. He had been perfectly justified in what he did,

for the nation, for Qizhe, and in order to protect his father. He had done no wrong. He had always cautioned me against Liu Tongyi, and had even had Liu Tongyi and Chu Xun perform a duet to hint to me that they were acquainted. There had been forbearance in all of this. Only, I had been too deeply ensnared to see it.

"How could I be angry at you, Supervisor Yun?" I said, then joked, "I recall I once thought that it would be suitable to die at Chancellor Liu's hands. Now I feel perfectly happy to have been personally captured by Supervisor Yun."

With a rueful expression, Yun Yu said, "Your Highness certainly is the most romantic man in the capital."

On one side of his neck above his collar, I made out a faint mark, indistinct in the light of the oil lamp.

I continued, "All your conduct toward me stemmed from the fact that our positions were different. Had I been in your position, I would have done the same as you. Every man chooses his own path. There is no right or wrong. Every man has his own fate, and to live decently is to accept that fate. I lost because I refused to accept mine. It is precisely the outcome one might have expected."

"Your Highness is not the only one like that," said Yun Yu. "My father is the same. My father has always seen Qi… His Majesty as a young, ignorant emperor and believed himself to be experienced and astute. I am his son. I knew perfectly well there was no way to talk him out of it."

At last a trace of weariness and frustration appeared in his expression.

It made sense for Yun Tang to misjudge Qizhe. As grand tutor, he had watched a child grow up to be an emperor; it would be easy to continue to see him as that innocent child. As if he didn't know how quickly people could change.

Perhaps the only one who completely understood Qizhe was Yun Yu.

"At any rate, you have saved your father's life," I said. "He won't be able to accept it now, but eventually he will understand that you did this to protect him."

Yun Yu shook his head. "He cannot take the loss as well as Your Highness, nor see as clearly."

"Thank you for the compliment, Supervisor Yun," I said. "Well, perhaps Grand Tutor Yun and I will be locked up together, and I'll cheer him up, help him see that it's better to accept triumph and failure as they come."

Yun Yu smiled again. "Your Highness is joking again. How could he lock you and my father up together?"

It went without saying that *he* was Qizhe.

Smiling, I said, "On the subject of jokes, there's something I want to say. Next time you get into a tiff, don't just grab whoever happens to be around in a drunken lark to vent your frustration. This isn't something to play around with. You see, if it's someone as given to self-conceited misunderstandings as me, in a few days, they'll be coming to you with romantic declarations, and won't that be annoying?"

That day at Yuehua Pavilion it had seemed to me that Yun Yu had something on his mind, and I had been right. My eyesight wasn't as poor as all that. Because while I myself had never seen sincerity, I had experienced enough insincerity to be able to distinguish the two.

Yun Yu's expression stiffened. With a bitter smile, he said, "Your Highness is a little angry at me, after all. I did go too far then. I was a little drunk that day. Later, I did regret it and didn't feel comfortable going to visit you for a few days for fear of awkwardness."

"Then I really must thank my imperial nephew for imposing on you, or else you might never have come to see me again. If I were angry at you, I wouldn't be talking like this now."

Yun Yu now stood in the position of my nephew's wife. As an elder, I had to give him a few words of advice.

I paused, then went on, "Yet there is some advice I have to give you. Take it as long-windedness on my part. You're a little too fond of getting your own way, too full of barbs right at the outset. It's because you're young. As for my imperial nephew, he isn't especially good-tempered either. There will unavoidably be conflicts between you. You must know how to compromise. The situation with your father being what it is, in the immediate future, you're sure to have a hard time. Think in the long term. In these matters, there is no road you cannot walk, no river you cannot cross."

Yun Yu stared at me in silence. Some time passed, and he tipped up the corners of his mouth and sighed. "How has this ended up with Your Highness giving me advice?"

"It must be because Pufang Temple really is my fate," I said seriously.

Yun Yu sat awhile longer, then rose. "I will bid farewell for now. In a few days I will come see Your Highness again. I hope Your Highness will take good care of yourself."

I watched him walk up to the cell door, then spoke again: "Suiya."

Yun Yu turned and raised his eyebrows, looking at me. "Is there something else, Your Highness?"

"Nothing," I said. "Thank you for talking to me."

Yun Yu smiled and said, "If Your Highness is willing to see me, I will come again in a few days."

I nodded. "Very well."

After Yun Yu left, I sat awhile, ate another meal, then went to lie in bed again. When the light in the ventilation hole had gradually dimmed, I stood and called over the guard in the passage. "Could you pass on a message for me? I would like to see Imperial Chancellor Liu."

The guard looked impatient. "Your Highness Prince Huai, do you think your position is the same as it once was? Imperial Chancellor Liu is the busiest person at court after His Majesty. Perhaps he is still handling official documents at this time. Do you think the chancellor will come running just because Your Highness gives a shout in prison?"

"It just occurred to me that there was something relating to this uprising that I hadn't told Chancellor Liu. Since he's busy, forget about it. But maybe I won't remember by tomorrow."

When he heard this, the guard vanished like the wind.

About one shichen later, Liu Tongyi arrived. He must have come from home. Instead of his official robes, he wore a jade-green gown.

I drank a mouthful of water. When I saw him stand at the table, I said, "Chancellor Liu, I'm sorry, I don't have anything to say relating to the uprising. There are just some things I'd like to ask for help with. I only said what I did because I was afraid the guard wouldn't agree to report it to you."

Liu Tongyi's brow smoothed. "No matter," he said.

"Thank you for today's meals, Chancellor Liu," I said.

"It ought to have been so all along," said Liu Tongyi. "They were being deliberately neglectful before. What did Your Highness want?"

I stood. "It's like this. Today Supervisor Yun came by and said that His Majesty had made two provisional arrangements for me. Chancellor Liu must know about them as well. These arrangements already show the utmost mercy toward me, but I have spent this half day pondering, and I think that neither house arrest nor taking orders at Pufang Temple suits me very well. That is why I am asking for your help, Chancellor Liu. I know you are very busy, and I shouldn't trouble you again, but I simply couldn't think of anyone else I could ask. Please say you agree."

Liu Tongyi's eyes in the lamplight were still very clear, just like many years before, when I had seen him for the first time in the moonlight.

"Please go ahead, Your Highness. While I may not be able to help, I will certainly do my best."

"I can rest easy with that," I said. I stood not far from Liu Tongyi. In the light of the oil lamp, our shadows were heavy.

"I only want to ask some trifles of you," I said. "If Prince Zong wakes and His Majesty does not confiscate Huai Manor, give everything that remains in it to Prince Dai if he likes. As for the manor itself, if he would like to sell it off, let him. Besides that, tell him that's all there is. If he spends it all, he won't be able to borrow any more from me. I do not know whether these events will make trouble for Han Si. When he goes to be married, please congratulate him for me. And that's all there is…"

I put a hand on the edge of the table and coughed twice. "One final word. Supervisor Yun came today, but I didn't feel like I could say this to his face, nor to Chu Xun. Please pass on a message to them both, Chancellor Liu. Say that they should have more self-respect. There are so many paths to take in this world. They shouldn't degrade themselves again."

Liu Tongyi looked appalled. He shot forward and caught me by the arms. "You…"

He turned. "Guards! Fetch a physician…"

I grabbed hold of his sleeves. "Chancellor Liu… about the conspiracy… I've said… all there is to say. There's nothing else."

Even in the yellow light of the oil lamp, Liu Tongyi's face managed to look chalky white. Perhaps my vision was starting to go.

"Please be merciful, Chancellor Liu… Let me go in peace, call no one…"

Liu Tongyi was still calling. My ears roared from the sound. More and more of the acid taste in my mouth surged up. I fought to gather strength to say, "There's no use calling anyone… I prepared this as a final step. Naturally, there is no cure…"

Perhaps this did the trick. Liu Tongyi's voice gradually quieted, as did he himself. Though I still had his sleeves caught in my hands, and my arms were still in his grasp, he gradually drew away.

My legs were weak, my eyelids heavy. I felt as if I was already lying in bed. The fabric slowly slipped from my fingers as I lost the strength to hold on. I struggled to preserve a last bit of clarity and said, "Ran… Ransi…"

My arms hurt a little where he was gripping them. Liu Tongyi was still listening to me. At the crucial moment, calling him Ransi was still effective.

I said, "As I am, I can hardly be buried… without causing trouble… so let me be burned… and scatter the ashes by some mountain or river… and everything will be clean."

After delivering this exhaustive speech, I had no more strength to speak. I drifted in a daze. I didn't know whether I had been dreaming before, or whether this now was the dream.

A dusting of snow swirled through the air. In Huai Manor's garden, little Yun Yu overturned the teacup on the young crown prince's knees and stood there blankly clutching his plum blossoms. Then the child in the boa-embroidered robe before him said, "There is nothing the matter with me. Do not scold him or punish him."

Yun Yu's eyes opened wide. Snow that had blown in under the veranda roof settled on the plum blossom branch in his hand.

The moon like a silver mirror, a pond full of stars. The youthful Liu Tongyi sat under a lantern, reading by its light, holding *The Legend of the Red-Bearded Hero* in both hands with his attention raptly focused on each and every page. A fog came up, and in the blink of an eye, night turned to day. The young Zhuangyuan with flowers in his hair wore a red robe. The green waters of the pond were gone, and the courtyard was full of crape myrtle, its flowers bright and beautiful.

I wanted to ask Liu Tongyi whether he still remembered the last line of *The Legend of the Red-Bearded Hero*:

Since time immemorial, so many righteous fellowships and heroic ideals have come to naught but a pot of good wine, a drunken reverie, and a night of pleasant dreams.

Chapter Seven

I passed through the dense greenery of the trellis, emerged from a moon gate, and scrutinized the house in front of me.

It was a simple but elegant two-story house, not large, with an airy hall below containing a small retiring room, and an upstairs divided into a rear bedroom and another hall in front. A veranda projected outward, accessible by opening a door in the hall. It had a wraparound wooden railing with a hanging screen of slender bamboo.

It would be just right for me to live in alone.

Bai Rujin looked at me and said, "Zhao-xiong, d'you like the looks of it?"

"It's all right," I said, "but why do all you southerners build your houses with two floors? It's hard to feel grounded sleeping upstairs."

I had planned on buying a small compound with two or three rooms. At any rate, I would be living there alone. Too much space would be cumbersome. But all the houses that met the eye in Chengzhou had multiple floors. My little two-room compound with a low half-wall, banana palm, drinking well, and grape trellis was nowhere to be found. Bai Rujin had told me that a family patriarch in the east of the city had died, and his sons and daughters were splitting up the family property. They had a little house they were eager to get off their hands and exchange for cash, and it was quite suitable for me. He had asked if I was interested and dragged me off to see it.

Next to Bai Rujin was the family's younger son, surname Hong, given name Xin. He was in his forties, small, skinny, and clever, with a ruddy complexion glowing with health. He didn't look one bit like an ardently filial son who had just lost his father. Listening to me, he immediately said with a smile, "I can tell Mister Zhao is from the north. Chengzhou lies to the southeast, so it's wet and humid. Living on the second floor keeps the damp away." He looked me over. "Seems Mister Zhao is planning to settle down in Chengzhou?"

"You don't know, Second Squire Hong," said Bai Rujin, "Master Zhao is a major traveling merchant. He's even done business in Goryeo. I got to know Master Zhao a year or two back when I was restocking my medicines. He owns a half interest in

my new shop on Changlong Street. I figure he'll still be all over the place, but now that he has a business here, he wants to buy a house to have somewhere to put up."

Hong Xin said repeatedly that it was an honor to meet me. In a rush, I said modestly, "I can't claim to be a major traveling merchant. I just travel around, selling a few sundry goods as I go, eking out a living."

Hong Xin said, "If Master Zhao likes the house, I'll sell it for a low price. Call it making a friend. Oh, yes," he went on, "I haven't asked Master Zhao's full name. My mother has been sick for a long time, and we want to buy some ginseng to make into a decoction for her. The effects of aged ginseng might be too much at her age. I've heard that while the ginseng in Goryeo is bland, its effects are also milder. If you happen to have any, Master Zhao, could you keep a couple of pieces back for me?"

"Of course, of course," I said. "I think I still have some on hand, all top-quality Goryeo red ginseng *seumnida*.[11] My surname is Zhao, my given name is Cai, and my courtesy name is Jiawang."[12]

"What auspicious names Master Zhao has," Hong Xin said in praise. Then he once again began to extoll the virtues of his house to me. According to him, the recently deceased Old Squire Hong had built it as a study. The old squire had been a Daoist practitioner and had come to stay here when he was at leisure to read and find solitude.

Hong Xin also said that there was an ingenious concept in the layout of this house. Entering by the main gate on the right-hand side, the area starting behind the screen wall and extending to the moon gate, with the ivy-covered trellis, was called the Spring Courtyard. In the main courtyard by the house was a small fishpond with two water lilies floating in it, a passable scene of summer. The small left-hand courtyard that contained the kitchen, woodshed, latrine, and well, because of its connection to eating and drinking and cereal grains, was called the Autumn Courtyard. Finally, a spot behind the house was planted with two delicate wintersweet plants; Hong Xin said that when they bloomed, the elegant and lovely scene was resplendent with the beauty of winter.

So this little house had spring, summer, autumn, and winter tucked away in it. Hong Xin said, "Therefore, my late father called it Four Seasons House."

This gave me a bit of an ache in my back teeth, but the house really was a bargain at the price. I mulled it over and bought it in the end.

After two or three years of wandering, I finally had a nest.

I bought the house and moved in. My first night there, I slept in great contentment.

Bai Rujin had said to me, "There's another advantage to living upstairs. Maybe you'll learn what it is before long, young fellow."

I did not understand at the time, but soon after, I did learn what the advantage was.

It was toward the end of the sixth month that I purchased the house. Not long after I moved in, the seventh month began. One day the sky darkened, and the sun never came out again. Pouring rain came drumming down. It fell for days. One morning I got up and went to the window and was astonished to find an ocean downstairs.

I stood at the window, watching as the water rose, rose, and rose again. I didn't go downstairs all day. The next morning, the water had submerged the courtyard wall. Bai Rujin came with two boatmen, paddling a little boat. They floated into the courtyard and picked me up.

I crouched on the bow, watching boats and rafts going up and down the streets of Chengzhou. The whole city was underwater, but no one seemed to care. On second floors above the street, shops were open as usual. Hawkers who normally set up stands by the street to sell vegetables and sundry goods were selling from boats instead. Even the provincial government's bailiffs swayed in little crafts as they patrolled the streets.

Bai Rujin had the boat rowed up to the second floor of a restaurant, from which a ladder hung. The boat came up to the ladder and stopped. I climbed after Bai Rujin to the second-floor corridor. Fortunately, my legs were nimble, and I could climb with ease. As soon as I set foot in the corridor, a waiter holding a towel bent down to dry and straighten my hems, then took me into the hall.

The menu was brought. I picked up a cup of tea and drank. From the corner of my eye, I saw a head emerge from a window in the restaurant across the street, then holler, "Scallions, give me a bunch!"

Immediately, a little dinghy heaped full of vegetables floated over.

I couldn't help sighing in admiration. "Your customs here are truly extraordinary."

Bai Rujin was flipping through the menu. He fingered the short mustache on his upper lip. "We're used to it."

Chengzhou wasn't far from the Long River, and it was bounded by two other rivers. Floods were common.

When each of us had ordered two dishes and we were waiting for our food, Bai Rujin looked out the window at the constant stream of boats and rafts and said chattily to me, "There's flooding around here every year. In order to protect some of the larger cities along the river, this place is often used as a spillway. Everyone's used to it. The water will come down in ten days or so."

Bai Rujin picked up a couple of five-spice beans and munched them, then said, "But you know, the water never got so high in the past. At most it'd be waist-deep. It was three years ago that the water started rising especially high." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Everyone says it's that wretched Prince Huai's soul haunting us."

I stared at him, then said, "Surely not? What connection does Prince Huai have to this place?"

Bai Rujin stretched his neck out further, and his voice became even quieter. "Well, you wouldn't know about it, young fellow. Chengzhou's name contains the character 'cheng,' same as in Prince Huai's courtesy name, and we have the Jun River to the south. I think Prince Huai's courtesy name was Chengjun…"

I laughed dryly. "Well…"

Stroking his short mustache, Bai Rujin said quietly, "Sometimes you have no choice but to believe in superstitious things like that. That miserable Prince Huai was lame, you know. And three years ago, not long after he died, the waters rose especially high here, and outside the city a Shuibo Temple dedicated to the river god was struck by lightning—because the 'bo' in its name sounds like 'lame.' Afterward, no one could repair that temple, until the emperor in the capital decreed that a big mausoleum was to be built for Prince Huai and a ritual was performed. Over here, we changed the Shuibo Temple to a Shuishen Temple and rebuilt it."[13]

"It sounds fantastical when you put it that way," I said.

Just then our food was brought, and Bai Rujin settled down for a bit. I picked up some shredded meat, and Bai Rujin poured a cup of wine. Outside the window, another crop of the prefectural bailiffs floated by standing in boats. Looking at the boats full of bailiffs, Bai Rujin said, "Recently, with the floods on the way, our local prefect sent to the court asking for provisions, and I've heard the court has sent an excellent commissioner to manage the flooding. He might be here soon. The local government has been keeping a pretty close eye on things for the past few days."

I hadn't kept up with court news over the past few years and didn't know how many of the mainstays there had changed. I couldn't resist asking, "Which of the court's officials merits such a big display?"

Bai Rujin lifted his wine cup and said quietly, "I hear it's Vice-Minister of Works Yun Yu—impressive enough? Since Imperial Chancellor Liu acknowledged his errors and resigned his post, who is there among the young officials at court to equal him, apart from Zhang Ping? Unfortunately, he is Yun Tang's son, and while Imperial Chancellor Liu shouldered nearly all the blame for the wrongful accusation against Prince Huai, I heard that he also had a part in it. If not for that, when Chancellor Liu resigned, the position of imperial chancellor might never have gone to Lord Zhang."

Holding my wine cup, I chuckled a bit.

Bai Rujin shook his head. "Maybe when that commissioner gets here, the waters will only rise higher."

Yun Yu was coming to manage the flooding and ought to be here in a few days. I would probably be staying in Chengzhou until the start of the eighth month. Maybe I'd be able to catch a glimpse of him, or maybe I wouldn't.

It was all the same whether I did or not.

The decades of a human lifetime were quite long. Yun Yu, Liu Tongyi, even Qizhe—there was no saying when I might run into my former acquaintances. Prince Huai was a handful of ashes now, interred in a mausoleum in the capital, and many people had watched him burn. Likely no one suspected that it had been a fraud. Now, only the merchant Zhao Cai remained. Even if they saw me, what could happen?

I wondered how all those people I had once known were doing now.

Were Yun Yu and my nephew—no, not my nephew anymore, His Majesty—getting along?

The emperor had been very virile over the last few years. I'd heard that there were many new little princes. Poor Yun Yu—during the events of three years ago, his whole family had become low-status convicts, apart from him. He was actually a very dutiful person and had saved their lives, but perhaps his family hated his guts. And of all the people in the world, he had fallen for the emperor.

So the saying goes that every pot has its lid. Probably no one but Qizhe could have tamed Yun Yu, and no one but Yun Yu could have bound Qizhe.

As for Liu Tongyi, when I heard he had resigned his position and returned home, I had felt some compunction. Here I had wrecked a pillar of the court. Later I heard rumors that he had retired to live in seclusion in the countryside, and also that he had gone traveling. I supposed he must be more relaxed than at court. He had said once that he wanted to be an idler. When I thought of that, my remorse lessened.

This encounter in Chengzhou with Yun Yu coming to manage the flooding might well be destiny. After this, perhaps I would run into him a few more times by coincidence, and perhaps I would never have another chance to see him.

After we ate at the restaurant, Bai Rujin took me to visit his house and talk over some shop business.

Bai Rujin's family ranked among the richest in Chengzhou City, with an impressive mansion. Now, half-submerged, a length of its enclosing wall still protruded from the water. A portion of the wall beside the main gate could be opened to give access to boats. Apparently all the wealthy households in Chengzhou had boat gates like this. The vessel entered the courtyard and floated right up to the main hall.

Bai Rujin had four wives, three sons, and two daughters. His eldest son was fourteen or fifteen already and learning his father's business. Bai Rujin called him over to pay respects to me. He called me Uncle Zhao.

Three of the other children were slightly younger, between the ages of seven and ten. They traipsed around the second-floor veranda, folding paper boats to toss into the water. Then there was the youngest, a precious daughter, only around a year old, and the child of Bai Rujin's third wife. This third madam was a shrewd, remarkable woman who took care of half the management of Bai Rujin's shops. The women of merchant families weren't in the habit of avoiding guests to begin with, and this third madam often accompanied Bai Rujin to discuss business. When it came to doing accounts, she was even more skilled than her husband.

The third madam sat in the hall with us this time too. Bai Rujin explained to me his plans and expenses for the shop, as well as future projects, and the third madam sat next to him with the ledger open, clicking away on an abacus. Each and every entry was clear and precise. Behind her stood a nursemaid holding the baby girl, as well as some other maids. After one mark or so, when she had all the accounts straightened out, she passed the ledger and the abacus to a maid and took the child from the nursemaid's arms.

“Bai-xiong and his wife truly are a match made in heaven,” I couldn’t help saying with admiration. “The picture of domestic harmony.”

Bai Rujin said with a smile, “Just find yourself one to marry, young fellow. My humble wife was so foolish, she couldn’t do anything when she first married me. But after only half a year of study, she was able to help out.”

The third madam joined in. “That’s right. Why don’t you get married, Master Zhao?”

“Few men in the world can have Bai-xiong’s luck,” I said, “to marry so many gentle and virtuous women, lovely as flowers and beautiful as jade, and above all to find someone as remarkable as you, Third Madam, with such looks and skill. I would like to marry, but I haven’t met the right person, so I must carry on as a bachelor.”

The third madam pressed her lips together and smiled. “That’s because Master Zhao’s standards are too high. You’ve been all over the world, and still no one has caught your eye.”

Bai Rujin shook his head. “Yue-niang, you’re wrong. As I see it, Master Zhao’s problem is that he has his heart set on someone, and he can’t forget her. That’s why he has remained unmarried so long. Isn’t that so, young fellow?”

“When did you learn to tell fortunes, Bai-xiong?” I joked, going along with it.

“Just tell me whether there’s someone on your mind,” said Bai Rujin. “Be honest.”

I thought about it, then nodded. “Honestly, yes.”

Bai Rujin clapped his hands and turned to the third madam. “You see?” Then he said to me, “Anyone who can occupy your thoughts to the point of preventing you from marrying must be a peerless beauty, no?”

“Yes, something like that,” I said.

Bai Rujin fingered his mustache. “And she must be talented as well as beautiful, and gentle as water.”

“The first is true. The second, I wouldn’t say so. She can be quite fierce.”

Bai Rujin slapped his leg with a loud laugh. “So you like to be bossed around. Does this young lady belong to a brothel, or is she a wealthy family’s young mistress?”

“She’s from a family of government officials,” I said.

“Whoa, that’s incredible,” said Bai Rujin. “An official’s daughter! Why didn’t it work out between you?”

“Well, she was in love with someone else, and it was mutual,” I said. “Now they’re together.”

Issuing many sighs on my behalf, Bai Rujin comforted me. "Young fellow, since it wasn't meant to be, you ought to know when to let go. There are plenty of good women out there."

"I've let it go already," I said. "I'm just used to being on my own. I've been so busy that I've forgotten all about it. I've been thinking lately of finding someone. If you know of anyone good, Bai-xiong and Third Madam, please introduce me."

Bai Rujin immediately smacked himself on the chest and promised to help.

The little girl was playing with a necklet in the third madam's arms. I dangled a bunch of grapes in front of her. She reached out her little hands for them and gurgled, "Dada, want."

Bai Rujin remarked rather despondently that the child had just learned to talk and had a bad habit; she called all women "mama" and all men "dada."

I gave her the grapes, and she immediately extended her arms to be picked up. I took her from her mother and held her, and she tugged on my collar enthusiastically crying, "Dada!" It was adorable.

In spite of myself, I thought perhaps I ought to find a wife. I didn't ask for much, just someone who would be sincere and pass the rest of my life with me. I could have a family, a few playful children of my own. There would be a beginning and an end to my life.

Bai Rujin urged me to stay at his house, and I firmly refused. He then loaned me two of his servants, a little boat, an empty wooden water barrel, and a barrel of clean water.

The two servants came with the boat in the mornings to take me for outings. I ate in town, or brought food home with me. In the evenings, the two servants returned to the Bai household.

There was water everywhere, but potable water was hard to come by. Everywhere the water was dirty. Everyone in the city had to paddle their boats and bring barrels to a spring on a mountain outside the city to pick up water to drink. Each family had two barrels prepared: one for holding potable water, and another to catch rainwater, which could be used for washing when it cleared.

Bai Rujin said that once the water subsided, I would have to stop up the well in the courtyard and dig a new one. The water in the original well had been polluted by the floodwaters, and using it was likely to make me sick.

The third madam also arranged to send me a case of charcoal bricks, a copper stove, and two kettles.

The charcoal bricks were kept in an iron box to keep them from catching fire. Only when I needed to use them would I put them in the copper stove to burn. One kettle was for heating water to make tea, and one was for heating water for household use.

I had always liked tea. The barrel of water from the Bai house was used up in two days.

Bringing the barrel, I took a boat to the mountain to fetch water. Row after row of boats were stopped by the mountain. The Bai family's servants showed me the way; a well-kept mountain road led all the way to the spring. The whole road was paved. It had been the city's wealthy families who had pooled money to pay for the work. There were also people with handcarts soliciting business on the road. I spent twenty coins to hire a cart; a carter was assigned to push my barrel up the mountain with his cart, fill it up with water, then bring it back down and help me load it onto the boat.

The local government posted a number of bailiffs at the spring. Later on, you would first give the bailiffs your name and take a token, then get your water when the bailiffs called your token's number. A tea stall was set up in an empty space where you could have a drink while you waited.

I had just sat down at the stall when a man approached me and quietly said, "Sir, I can tell from your face and clothing that you're an important man. Your time is valuable. I have a token here that I got up first thing this morning to get. There are only two or three people ahead of it waiting to get water. For a ten-coin tip, I'll switch with you. Otherwise you'll be waiting at least another shichen."

Ten coins wasn't much, but I didn't have anything to do today. It wouldn't hurt to wait awhile. So I refused. When the man had walked away, the carter said to me, "Lucky you didn't buy it, sir. That's one of the city's ruffians. He's ganged up with the others. They come every morning to line up and get tokens, then make money swapping them with people who come later, then swap the tokens they got in exchange with people who come even later. They make more money that way in a day than we do doing the hard work of pushing carts. The bailiffs already know some of them. There's a high-ranking court official on his way to manage the flooding, so the local prefect wants to improve order. If you'd swapped with him, the bailiffs might have taken your token and not let you get water at all."

So that was it. It seemed that government merchants weren't the only ones who knew how to take advantage of a disaster to make money.

In another half a shichen or so, I got my water and went down the mountain, then took the boat to the city. On the way, I picked up a hunk of meat and two pounds of mushrooms from the boats along the road. All the seasonings in my kitchen had been soaked by the floodwaters, so I bought more salt, sugar, peppercorns, anise, and cumin.

When I'd gone to the desert in the north to collect furs, I had brought a grilling rack for meat. It happened to be stored on the second floor and hadn't been submerged. When I got home today, I planned to dangle a fishing rod from the veranda, sit by the copper stove, grill meat, and drink wine. I thought it would be most pleasant.

The old lady selling mushrooms gave me a rattan basket, just big enough to hold the meat, mushrooms, and seasonings. I was ready to stop by a wineshop to get a small jar of good wine. The boat was on its way when I heard someone call, "Master Zhao." I turned my head and saw the Bai family's old steward aboard a boat next to me with the third madam. She must have been on her way back from checking the accounts at the shop. I returned the greeting. A nursemaid was standing next to her, holding the little girl.

The little girl was bawling, and her voice was quite resonant. I asked what was the matter. The third madam said with a pained smile, "This morning she insisted on coming with me, and now she's crying to go back home. Steward Zhang has to go to the shop up ahead to do some things, and she won't settle down no matter what we do."

"Perfect," I said. "I'm on my way home. You and your darling daughter can go home in this boat, then it'll take me back."

"How could I impose like that?" said the third madam.

Smiling, I said, "It's my pleasure, Third Madam. This boat belongs to you, anyway. I won't like using it if you act like this."

"If you put it that way, we certainly can't refuse," she said sweetly. Then she had her boat approach mine. I took the child, and the nursemaid came aboard my boat supporting the third madam.

Once the child was in my arms, she rubbed her tears and snot on my shoulder and called me "Dada," then unexpectedly sniffled into silence. The nursemaid tried to take her back, but she twisted away reluctantly. "Let me hold her for now," I said.

"You two have really hit it off, Master Zhao," said the nursemaid with a smile.

"Why not just make her my goddaughter?" I joked.

Bai Rujin's little daughter sprawled on my shoulder. The nursemaid picked up the rattan basket I had just put down at my feet, and the little girl took a fancy to the mushrooms in the basket. She reached out and babbled, "Dada, that one, Dada, that one!" The third madam's thin brows drew together, and she lightly smacked the girl's little hand, scolding her for being naughty. The little girl's mouth puckered up. I could tell she was about to start bawling again, and it would be my ears and my robe that paid the price. I quickly said, "Little kids are cuter when they're a bit naughty." I freed up a hand to pluck a mushroom from the basket, wiped it on my robe, and gave it to her. The little girl quickly snatched it up and gurgled a laugh, displaying her still-growing baby teeth. She got ready to put the mushroom in her mouth.

I quickly stopped her. The nursemaid said with a smile, "Master Zhao really has a soft spot for children." But the third madam said to me in a low voice, "Master Zhao, did the boat that went by just now look like an official boat to you? The man in the boat looks to me like someone important."

Oh? My attention had been focused solely on Bai Rujin's little daughter just now. I hadn't noticed any boat. When the third madam said this, I looked in the direction she indicated.

The instant I looked in that direction, I met two gazes.

The boat had an awning, a lacquer-black one. Its hull was brand new. Four men rode in it. They were dressed in ordinary clothes but had perfect posture. These were not ordinary boatmen.

Two people stood at the fore, one wearing a light-colored robe. He was upright and cold, his appearance absolutely meticulous. From his figure and manner you might almost have taken him for Zhang Ping. But I kept watching him, even after he had turned away to look elsewhere.

Even without seeing his face, even though he had changed so much, I knew him at first glance.

Bai Rujin's little daughter squirmed, tugging on my robe. "Dada, Dada."

I looked away and said to the third madam, "Could that be the commissioner?"

He was Yun Yu.

I went with the boat as it took the third madam and her daughter back to the Bai residence. Bai Rujin wasn't there. The third madam politely asked me to stay, and I politely declined.

Turning back from the Bai residence, I bought a small jar of wine on the way, returned to the house, set up the grilling rack, then drank wine and ate meat.

When I had washed the meat and was slicing it, there was another spell of heavy rain, which evoked a particular sensation as it fell on the standing water. I lit the coal fire, laid out some cuts on the rack, then poured myself wine.

Chengzhou's local wines were all yellow wines, and the wineshops also stocked things like Capital Vintage, Bamboo Leaf Green, and apricot-blossom wine, none with especially authentic flavors. The wine I had bought was Chengzhou's local Bamboo Leaf Green, a clear wine that had a faint, mellow sweetness. Yellow wine unfortunately tends to be warming, and though with the flooding and the rains, it was quite cool now, we were nonetheless in the hottest days of summer, and I was grilling a leg of mutton. If on top of that I downed half a jin of yellow wine, it would be throwing oil on the fire, and I was sure to end up with blisters around my mouth.

By the Mid-Autumn Festival, however, the weather would be just right for drinking yellow wine and eating crabs. I would probably be out east by the sea by the fifteenth day of the eighth month, where there would be fresh sea crabs to eat. I could bring a couple of jars of quality yellow wine with me when I went.

With dark clouds weighing heavy, the sky dim, rain sheeting down like a curtain beyond the eaves, and a cold wind carrying an occasional drop or two inside, there was a strange comfort in this moment. Once I had looked down on the literati, thinking they were a pretentious bunch who might sit in a dingy house composing poetry about a field of freshly fertilized radishes. Now I was eating grilled mutton, looking out on rain and water as far as the eye could see, and I felt myself to be quite refined, not all that different from them.

I had watered down the Chengzhou Bamboo Leaf Green with some of the spring water I had picked up today. It had a particular savor. It would have been even better if I'd had some watermelon, thinly sliced and chilled, or chilled dark plum juice to break up the oiliness of the food.

Seeing Yun Yu on the boat earlier had been within my expectations. I didn't think anything of it.

Only, I hadn't thought he would have changed so much in three years. Likely this had to do with the emperor's virility, which had produced several princes.

He and Qizhe were destined not to have easy lives. But easy or not, it had nothing to do with me. Each man walks the path he chooses. And perhaps what

looks hard in the eyes of outsiders is happiness to the people experiencing it.

I wondered whether Yun Yu had recognized me. The crippled Prince Huai, Chengjun, no longer existed; there was only the merchant Zhao Cai, who could neither raise a rebellion nor covet the throne. Even if he had seen me, he had nothing to worry about on Qizhe's behalf. Or perhaps not. Maybe he would think that I had fled out into the world with my evil designs intact and was still using my secret power to reestablish myself.

Then he would once again come to me with a crowd of officers, with manacles and chains.

Faking my death to escape unquestionably made me a condemned prisoner staging a prison break, a crime of treason against the emperor. If it could be substantiated and I was dragged back to the capital, this could only end in a beheading.

On the surface now, Prince Huai had committed suicide. After Prince Zong had woken up, the emperor had awarded me a big mausoleum on top of a stainless reputation. But who knew what these people were really thinking.

A dead man gave people a sense of security; all kinds of lip service might be paid to him. But if that dead man came alive, now that was awkward. If I was capable of faking my death, that seemed to bear out the existence of my secret power. Perhaps he would order me to be put away in secret. Only when the dead man was truly dead would they feel secure at last.

With the flooding, it would be hard to run. I would stay quiet and observe.

Yun Yu worked now for the Ministry of Works, not the Ministry of Justice. He had only come to manage the flooding; that was just fine. If he really had seen me and become suspicious, he would have to observe in secret for a few days. On top of that, he would be busy with his work, and letters would be difficult to send. This left me ample room to maneuver.

When I left Chengzhou, I would go to the southeast to pick up goods and go to sea, to some place like Java, to lie low for a couple of years.

My mother once said to me, *If there is any suspicion you might make an attempt on the throne, you will come to no good. Loyal or treacherous, no one could endure you.* I didn't completely believe her. It was only later that I discovered that my father and I had both been less clear-sighted than my mother, a woman.

When my attempt to be a spy turned into a joke, ultimately it was an escape plan she had arranged for me that saved my life.

My escape had been a little unfair on Liu Tongyi. I had observed and judged the situation thus: besides Qizhe, the most astute and capable official involved in this matter could be none other than Liu Tongyi, and he was the leader. I could only succeed by hoodwinking Imperial Chancellor Liu.

So I had played out a melodrama in front of Liu Tongyi. It had been quite realistic. I did manage to fool him.

Anyone, however astute and capable he might be, would be thrown off-balance by watching someone spit up blood and perish before his very eyes.

Huai Manor had no secret power, but it did have two adept individuals. They were Zhang Xiao and Chief Steward Cao.

Zhang Xiao's original name was Shao Feng, and Chief Steward Cao's was Yue Su. Once, the two of them had been among the world's most notorious bandits. Shao Feng was an expert in disguise, and Yue Su in quick getaways.

During a drought in Zhongzhou, Shao Feng impersonated an imperial commissioner and used a falsified imperial edict to have grain disbursed. There was plague in Shucheng, and government soldiers had sealed the city, leaving the people in it to die. Yue Su had been a bandit outside the city then. He went to the imperial treasure house in the capital, cut the strings of beads off the emperor's crown, and sold them to buy medicine to provide disaster relief. While in the imperial treasure house, he also plastered notes everywhere proclaiming "Shucheng's Yue Su Rights Wrongs on Behalf of Heaven." The two of them each had a large bounty placed on his head by the government. One after another, they fled to the border, where they became soldiers under my father's banner. My father feigned ignorance.

Later, barbarians invaded. Shao Feng impersonated an enemy deputy general, infiltrated their camp, and cut off their general's head. Yue Su reconnoitered the terrain and led over a hundred soldiers by a path that let them launch a successful sneak attack on the enemy barracks. The barbarians were defeated. Unfortunately, the two men's backgrounds were exposed in the course of performing these labors. My father made a plan: he brought to Shao Feng two corpses so he could alter their appearances; then he said the two men were dead. The deception was complete.

From there on, the two of them changed their names and became stewards at Huai Manor. There they remained for decades, and even I hadn't known.

The Scholar of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills, who wrote *The Divine White Jade Sword*, was then an obscure scribe. He wrote a book called *Chivalrous Bandits in Troubled Times*, based on the two of them. That was how he made his name, which later led to *The Divine White Jade Sword* and so forth.

Only, in the book, to set off the depiction of chivalry, the characters were unavoidably touched up, turning the near-illiterate, simple and single Shao Feng and Yue Su into romantic and dashing figures. They were young, handsome, and surrounded by a melodious crowd of countless infatuated young mistresses and beautiful heroines. When the two chivalrous bandits were killed, an infatuated imperial chancellor's daughter and princess even perished to follow them.

I hadn't known about Chief Steward Zhang and Chief Steward Cao's identities when I was young. I got a copy of *Chivalrous Bandits in Troubled Times* from the bookbindery and became mesmerized and misty-eyed. In one part, Yue Su meets the princess on a balcony. The sentimental portion was followed by a scalding love scene. I swallowed and read on, completely forgetting myself, and was unfortunately caught by my father. He sat on the veranda reading with immense interest, laughing nonstop. "What a load of bull!"

My mother shot him a glare. "No vulgar language in front of the child. You ought to show the book to Old Zhang and Old Cao."

My father nodded. "You're absolutely right." I watched uncomprehendingly as he dog-eared some pages of the book, then bounced off with it under his arm.

It was only when my mother was on the point of death that she told me about Shao Feng's and Yue Su's true identities. And she said to me, *You have some problems in common with your father, so I made an escape plan for you many years ago. Those two will keep you safe.*

But I never thought I would really have to use her plan. When I had put that pill in the secret pocket in the collar of my inner robe, I had been planning to use it to save Yun Yu if worse came to worst. I never expected to use it myself.

The plan wasn't a particularly brilliant one. All it took was going to a coffin home to find an unclaimed corpse of similar build to me. Everything hinged on my performance being up to scratch.

After I was put in the imperial prison, Shao Feng infiltrated the prison guards and came to see me twice, the first time among the personal guards Qitan and Qifei brought when they came to visit me, the second on the morning of the escape, when he was once again dressed as a prison guard and came to clean up my dishes. He informed me that everything had been arranged.

During those two days, Liu Tongyi, Chu Xun, Qitan, Qifei, and Yun Yu all came on stage, giving me ample cause. So I performed a melodrama for Liu Tongyi, giving full vent to my emotions.

According to the rules, a person like me, who commits suicide in prison out of fear of punishment, could not be left in the prison. Instead, I would be placed on a mat and carried to a shed or a retiring room; once the corpse was examined, a decision would be made about my burial and funeral.

After I was "dead," my nephew the emperor was sure to grant me a coffin and set of good burial garments to show his benevolence. No one would spend a great deal of effort making funeral arrangements for me; I was sure to be buried at once, with a memorial tablet prepared. The ministers and the emperor would put their heads together, issue a decent enough official decree about me, and then all would be well.

Therefore, the time to act would be after the examination of the corpse, when the corpse was to be washed and dressed. I was worried that I would still be kept under strict guard, which was why I told Liu Tongyi I wanted to be cremated. First, it would make the whole production more genuine, as if I were sincerely disheartened; it made my plight more wretched. Second, the body would have to be taken to a remote, open place in the suburbs to be burned; there were sheds and stacks of firewood out in the country, making it easier to tamper with the process. It would be an additional chance to swap the bodies. Third, this avoided issues in case Liu Tongyi recovered his senses, or Qizhe or Yun Yu or someone became suspicious and had the coffin opened to reexamine the body; or if Prince Zong woke and, for the sake of decency, they wanted to move my body and hold another funeral. Becoming a handful of ashes was more foolproof.

Perhaps everyone thought that, with Prince Huai dead, all was right with the world. Just as I had expected, they were beside themselves with happiness, and in order to make sure their happiness was merited, they all came to observe the washing and dressing of the body. According to what the two chief stewards told me later, the emperor himself came to supervise the proceedings, and Yun Yu and Liu Tongyi were naturally present as well. The empress dowager was unable to come in person, so she sent her big brother to represent her. It was a fairly grand spectacle. Even my princess came from her convent, with her growing belly and a handful of nuns, to recite scriptures of reincarnation for me and hope that I would set aside the sins of this lifetime and be a good person in the next.

I'd heard that, of all the people present, only Qitan cried. Liu Tongyi left midway. Unfortunately, I had been unconscious at the time and had no chance to experience this grand occasion for myself. Shao Feng and Yue Su found no opportunity to swap the bodies. Fortunately, I'd had wits enough to think of cremation and avoided the tragedy of my fake death turning into a living burial.

It was fortunate too that the weather was hot and bodies could not be left lying out for long. The emperor also thought that cremation would be more thorough. After the washing and dressing of the body, I was taken to Pufang Temple, the very one originally built for me, where my body rested for one night. Of course, no one was present to keep vigil or burn funeral money for me. Many guards were stationed to keep watch over the corpse, but because I was dead and had preferred men in life, they gave me a wide berth and did not look too closely. This gave Shao Feng and Yue Su an opportunity to exchange me for the disguised corpse.

The body was burned the next day in an empty space in the rear courtyard of Pufang Temple. Then the ashes were placed in an urn, which was consigned to a coffin, which was buried behind Pufang Temple.

I opened my eyes in a carriage leaving the capital. I very much felt as though I had arrived in the next life. My own hideouts in the valley in Xinan and in Xuzhou had been cleaned out by Yun Yu, so I couldn't go anywhere near them. Chief Steward Cao—Yue Su, that is—told me that the late Princess Huai, my mother, had arranged for my escape many years ago. I had a registered residence and a hometown; because my parents were both in business, I had left home very young, but I still had a house in my hometown. My old neighbors still remembered that my nickname was Jiawang, that I had climbed the scholar tree of the neighbors to the east and pilfered pomegranates from the neighbors to the west.

I parted ways with Yue Su and went with Shao Feng to see the latter's teacher, who performed acupuncture on my leg and straightened out the sinews, which had been bunched for over a decade. Straightening them out was no easy matter. It took three months of recovery before my limp went away. I bade farewell to Shao Feng and his teacher, then went home to Qinshui Town in Shuangqiao County in Zhengyang Prefecture, where I stayed for a few days, saw the old neighbors, cleaned up the old house that had stood empty for over a decade, paid my respects at the ancestral hall and the tombs of my ancestors, then went on to travel all over doing business.

When I set out on the road, I heard that Prince Zong had woken up, and Prince Huai had transformed from a rebel prince to a wretched, wrongfully dead loyal subject. For a time this topic was regularly bandied about in public places. I listened as though they were talking of someone else, and sometimes contributed some opinions of my own; Prince Huai truly was luckless.

As expected, the urn was dug up from its grave behind Pufang Temple. The erection of a large mausoleum was followed by a lavish funeral. The emperor very

properly assumed personal responsibility, and Liu Tongyi resigned his position. It seemed there were also plans to convert Huai Manor into a memorial temple or something of the sort. At any rate, it was a very happy ending all around.

Beyond the eaves, the rain gradually weakened. As I recalled the events of three years ago and of the intervening three years, I felt like a man remembering his past life. Sadly, the Scholar of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills had laid aside his brush long ago. With a bit of modification, he could have turned all these events into a book. Well, if he were still alive, he probably wouldn't have chosen this story, actually. Everyone loves to read legends of heroes. Who wants to read an account of a shiftless prince turned merchant?

I sprinkled some cumin on a slice of meat and flipped it, then caught a glimpse of a boat in the distance approaching my house.

I narrowed my eyes and looked closely. It appeared to be the Bai residence's boat.

When it reached the railing, sure enough it was Bai Rujin who darted from the cabin, jumped onto the veranda, then strode urgently inside. "Young fellow, we have a problem."

I stood in surprise. Bai Rujin stomped over, pulled up a chair, and sat. Rubbing his hands together, he said, "There's an issue with that batch of silk you ordered."

"What is it?" I asked.

I had planned to stay in Chengzhou until the beginning of the eighth month precisely because of this batch of silk.

Chengzhou had a kind of silkworm that produced silk in the seventh and eighth months. Instead of mulberry leaves, it exclusively fed on what was commonly known as the butter tree. A great deal of silk was produced in both spring and autumn, but little in summer. One could make a tidy profit by selling it to the weaving mills in Suzhou and Hangzhou. The silk made by this kind of silkworm was yellowish, insufficiently white, and came cheap, but once it was woven and dyed, it made quite a close weave, and none of its flaws could be seen.

I had come to Chengzhou originally to deliver a batch of medicines Bai Rujin had ordered, and on the way I had stopped to eat and inadvertently overheard someone mention the state of silkworm eggs this summer. That was how I learned of these silkworms. The locals all thought their silk was bad and had never sold it elsewhere, so I became interested in getting some and trying. In order to get Bai Rujin to act as a go-between to purchase the silk, I invested some money in his medicine shop. Then I spoke to some of the silk mills in Suzhou and Hangzhou, prosperous cities in

Jiangnan with thriving silk trades, and they were also quite interested.

Bai Rujin said, "Some traveling traders have come from the Suzhou-Hangzhou area, also to purchase silk, and they're offering twice the price you agreed on, young fellow. I hear they're from one of the firms you were planning to resell the silk to, called Ruihe."

Ruihe!

Ruihe had been the largest cloth merchant firm in Jiangnan these past couple of years. They controlled several stores and around a dozen weaving mills and embroidery workshops. Most of my talks about reselling the silk in Jiangnan had been with two or three of Ruihe's weaving mills because I had thought they were relatively trustworthy businessmen. But instead they had come to Chengzhou during a flood to undercut me.

Paying twice the price I had offered for that silk would mean taking a loss. It was a little strange for them to come all this way during a flood in order to lose money and undercut me by stealing my deal.

"I also thought it was strange," said Bai Rujin. "They could get the best silk in Jiangnan for that price. Why come to Chengzhou during a flood to steal someone else's business? The concern is, now that they've artificially driven up the price, once they force you out, they'll lower the prices again. But now the price is so high I'm afraid some of the families that ordered it here will go back on their word."

At any rate, the whole thing seemed peculiar.

Bai Rujin continued, "We're all in the same business. Openly driving you out like this is against the rules. I heard first thing this morning and went over right away to talk to them. I saw two of the Ruihe people. They said they had no intention of undercutting us, they actually want a long-term partnership. One of their higher-ups has come, maybe even the general manager. He invited us to come over and chat with them this afternoon, so they can explain their reasoning to us. This manager is going to be leaving tomorrow. Do you want to come?"

I thought about it. "Why not?"

I put out the coal fire, changed my clothes, and took Bai Rujin's boat to see the people from Ruihe.

Bai Rujin said that Ruihe's people had arranged a banquet on Jiqing Lane, which was the most presentable place in Chengzhou, with good wine, good tea, good music, and beautiful women. It was a good place to talk business, and the rain had petered out. Unfortunately, I had just filled my belly with grilled mutton and

probably wouldn't be able to eat anything else.

When the boat reached Jiqing Lane, a waiter led us inside via the second-floor corridor. We came to a private room, and the waiter opened the door. The man standing at the window turned. I paused at the door.

He paused at the window.

Bai Rujin saluted and said, "Master Mei, we saw each other this morning. This is Master Zhao, whom I told you about."

I gave him a palm to fist salute. "I am Zhao Cai."

Liu Tongyi's clear eyes looked directly into mine. He lifted his sleeves and smiled. "I am Mei Yong."[14]

The dining table in the private room wasn't very large. Apart from Liu Tongyi, Bai Rujin, and myself, the only other person at this banquet was one of Ruihe's accountants. Once we were seated, Bai Rujin began: "Master Mei, I am most indebted to you for your generosity in inviting Master Zhao and myself to eat with you. As for the matter of the silk, I am only a middleman. Master Mei should really be talking to Master Zhao. You're both in business. Friendship begets fortunes, you know."

As Bai Rujin spoke, I looked at Liu Tongyi.

The Chancellor Liu of three years ago had been constantly busy with government affairs and unavoidably severe in aspect as a result. Now, without the constraint of the office of imperial chancellor, Mei Yong's appearance and expression were both considerably more relaxed.

Liu Tongyi was also openly scrutinizing me. Mei Yong and Zhao Cai were meeting for the first time. It was only natural that they would want to size each other up.

When Bai Rujin was finished, Liu Tongyi said, "Master Bai and Zicheng can eat. I would like to find a retiring room to go have a chat with Master Zhao. Would that be acceptable?"

"I would be glad of a chance to talk to Master Mei," I said.

Ruihe's accountant immediately went to arrange for a small room, which seemed specially made for secret business deals. It contained only a potted tree, a square table, and a few chairs.

Liu Tongyi and I sat across from each other at the table. The waiter knocked on the door and came in, bringing a few dishes and a bottle of wine. He bowed and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

I looked at the dishes on the table and smiled in spite of myself. "We said we only wanted a room to talk, but they've sent us food and wine instead of tea. That's typical of a restaurant."

Liu Tongyi also smiled. He held back his sleeve and poured the wine. "Just as well. Now that the food is here, we may as well eat. I've heard there is an excellent locally brewed wine in Chengzhou. I wonder if this is it?"

I picked up my full cup and brought it to my nose. "No, Chengzhou's local wine is yellow. Perhaps the proprietor saw that we had come from out of town to talk business and decided to send us the local imitation of Bamboo Leaf Green."

"It would seem that Master Zhao has been in Chengzhou for some time," said Liu Tongyi.

"Yes," I said, "I came before the flooding started. I have only remained here so long because of this batch of silk."

Liu Tongyi looked at me with a smile. "I would venture to guess that Master Zhao was not previously involved in the silk trade."

If I were to answer in the same style, *What makes Master Mei think that*? Liu Tongyi would certainly have a response waiting in the nature of *You seem familiar*. That would be routine. But I had been away from court for some years, and I wasn't in the mood to go around in circles. His question had been disingenuous, but I answered sincerely.

I put down my wine cup. "Yes, I travel far and wide at will and pick up all kinds of things along the way. Because I have spent more time in the north, I often have things like furs and ginseng. This time, I came to deliver medicines, but I happened to see that there was summer silk available, so I waited to buy a batch."

I looked at Liu Tongyi and smiled again. "Unlike Master Mei, I am not engaged in regular business. I can do without this batch of silk. If you want it, I'll simply withdraw my order. I am not in the cloth trade anyway."

When the flooding receded, I would gather up the property I had put away in the last two years and go to Java to lie low. This deal wasn't going to go through, one way or another. I might as well be generous and give the silk to "Master Mei."

"Clearly you think I mean to steal your business," said Liu Tongyi. "The reason I wanted to speak to Master Zhao this evening was in order to explain this: Ruihe is not driving up the price of silk in order to undercut you. We want to enter into a long-term business arrangement with you."

Perhaps my years doing business had been too short. This was my first time hearing of such reasoning behind driving up prices and stealing business.

Liu Tongyi removed a small bundle of threads and a piece of fabric from his sleeve. "This is the sample you brought to the negotiation at our weaving mill. You may not know, Master Zhao, that no sooner had you left than the people from the weaving mill brought this to me."

I took the threads and fabric. Liu Tongyi said, "I suppose Master Zhao doesn't recognize this variety of silk."

"Indeed I know nothing of silks," I said. "I've only heard from Bai-xiong that people in Chengzhou called it butter silk, and because the color isn't good—not white, that is—they don't dare to sell it elsewhere. They all dye and weave it at home to make into clothing. They call it oil cloth. It's a little better than cotton, a little sturdier than ordinary silk, and doesn't wrinkle much. Perhaps in the south you've seen silk of this kind made in other places and have another name for it?"

Liu Tongyi listened in silence while I finished, then sighed softly. "This silk does have another name—ambergold silk. The silkworm that produces it is called the ambergold silkworm. This silkworm forms cocoons at the end of summer and only eats the leaves of the golden cedar. The silk it produces is as glossy as amber, which gives it its name. Brocade woven from ambergold silk is known as ambergold brocade, and is usually made for the imperial family's exclusive use."

Liu Tongyi looked at my dumbfounded expression and added, "In the past, His Highness Prince Huai often wore robes made of ambergold brocade."

So butter silk was an old friend of mine. No wonder my fate was tied to it like this. I really hadn't noticed before how familiar it was.

Therefore, the butter tree whose leaves gave sustenance to the local silkworms was in reality the golden cedar. It was often used to make coffins. I had heard that when my ashes were dug up to be given a grand funeral, they had been placed in a big coffin made of golden cedar. A boa-embroidered robe had also been used to wrap the urn containing the ashes; perhaps that had been made of ambergold brocade.

If that were truly the case, when I fled to the south sea, if I took along a few bolts of ambergold silk and some butter tree wood to sell in the south on the way, I could make a nice profit.

I acted as if I hadn't heard Liu Tongyi's last statement. I touched the threads and cloth and said, "No wonder that as Ruihe's general manager, Master Mei would come in person during the flooding to force up the price."

Liu Tongyi said, "That is precisely what I have to explain. You know that there are many firms like Ruihe in Jiangnan, and they plant spies in our weaving mills and shops. I am afraid that by now everyone in the business is aware that there is ambergold silk in Chengzhou. If we were to purchase the silk at the price you offered, it would inevitably be intercepted. Perhaps those who raise the silkworms would think we were engaged in dirty business, and they wouldn't sell their silk to us again. We would like as far as possible to keep hold of Chengzhou's silk resources and continue operations going forward. But as we were previously unacquainted, I lacked an understanding of Master Zhao's conduct and temper. I was concerned that if I discussed raising the price of silk with you, you wouldn't agree, so I acted as I did. I had no intention of stealing your deal. In fact, I only wanted you to be able to talk to us and to agree to raising the offering price, so we could have a long-term business arrangement in the future. I'm sorry to have overstepped."

He removed a folded piece of paper from his sleeve. I took it and unfolded it to see it was a signed note returning all the silk that Ruihe had taken. The handwriting throughout the note, and for the two characters of "Mei Yong," was in Liu Tongyi's usual vigorous style.

I couldn't help saying, "I can feel confident while dealing with Master Mei. No wonder Ruihe does business on such a large scale."

Liu Tongyi picked up the wine pitcher. "Master Zhao's way is the more comfortable one." He raised his wine cup to his lips, then put it back down. "Have you always traveled like this?"

"I just go around here and there and pick up a bit of work while I'm at it," I said.

When my leg had healed and I wandered out, I decided to do some business. The fuss about Prince Huai being absolved of wrongdoing had just died down. When I went north, I deliberately passed close to the capital to let the echoes of that event wash over me.

Though I had started a new life, I still wanted to hear news of the life I had left behind. What I heard was that Liu Tongyi had resigned his position. The emperor, after assuming responsibility, had continued to manage affairs of state wisely. Prince Dai had taken all the remaining money in Huai Manor and traveled to Henan, where he diligently strove to fulfill his aspirations; probably he had finally realized that antiquities dealers were unreliable and was ready to do his own digging. Prince Zong no longer took part in affairs of state but had retired to his home to rest in his old age. The empress dowager had said she would eat a vegetarian diet on Prince

Huai's behalf for the rest of her life. The princess's child had been born; it was a boy. He had been taken by the Li family to raise. The princess said she would recite scripture for Prince Huai as long as she lived. I hadn't heard anything about the others.

And so there shouldn't have been anything to hear. The court was stable, with no more great evils. They were all comfortable, living well. Everyone was happy.

As I went north, my cutsleeve problem went away. After all my experiences, once I was free, common women turned out to be like fresh flowers and sweet spring water. There was Xiaodie of Baicheng, Wanwan of Qinzhou, the northern frontier's Xue'e, the desert's Alianna, Kim Mija in Goryeo… They were each gentle, or understanding, or unsophisticated, or lively and innocent. They truly warmed the heart, and they had thoroughly consoled me.

Outside the half-closed window, the sound of rain was growing stronger. I looked out and said, "I heard you plan to leave tomorrow. I don't know whether the rain will have stopped by then."

"I might stay in the city another few days," Liu Tongyi said.

"Then we will be able to discuss this deal in more detail," I said.

I would be glad if he stayed a few more days. After we parted in Chengzhou, who knew whether we would ever meet again?

I said to Liu Tongyi, "It must be very hard work overseeing a business concern as large as Ruihe. How did Master Mei end up in trade?"

Liu Tongyi looked out the window as well. "When I was young, I read a romance. There was a hero in it who, after roaming around doing chivalrous deeds, switched to trade. Although…"

I picked up: "Although, that hero was in the antiques trade? *The Legend of the Zither Hero of the Late Sui Dynasty*."

Liu Tongyi nodded. His face opened into a smile. "Yes."

I stood and strode to the window. Liu Tongyi came up beside me and pushed the window sash fully open. Rain struck the eaves and wet the windowsill.

We returned to finish the banquet, and by the time we left Jiqing Lane, it was full dark outside, and the rain had become heavier. Liu Tongyi and Ruihe's accountant were staying at an inn not far from Jiqing Lane, so they bade us farewell.

There were two boats from the Bai residence picking us up. Bai Rujin and I each took one.

Bai Rujin said, "It's raining hard, young fellow, so I won't stand on ceremony with you. You hurry home now." We parted ways at a fork in the road.

The boat swayed amid the pouring rain as I sat in the cabin looking out. We had nearly reached the house. The boatman said, "Master Zhao, there's a boat at your gate. Do you have guests?"

I left the cabin and opened an umbrella. There was indeed a boat moored in front of the house. At the bow, a single person stood in the rain. By the dim light of a dark lantern in the downpour, I still recognized him at a single glance.

I had thought before about what I would say to him if we ever really did meet again.

My idea had been that I would treat him as a stranger, exchange some small talk, then bid farewell. But now I knew that I had been wrong.

When I saw him, I couldn't say a thing. I didn't know what I could say.

Say, *Excuse me, who might Your Excellency be*?

Say, *Why are you here*?

What am I supposed to say to you? *How can I talk to you*?

On his first day in Chengzhou, the imperial commissioner was standing here in the rain at night. The local prefect and all the government soldiers would now be certain that I was a character who merited close investigation.

What were his intentions?

To capture me on Qizhe's behalf and make me face the charge of treason? Or to reminisce about old times, then let me go and act as if this had never happened?

Or only to ask me who I was, discover the truth?

Standing there, I heard him say on the boat across from me, "You're back."

After a pause, I heard myself say, "It's raining so hard. Why don't you come in."

Inside, I groped my way to the table, shook a fire stick to life, and lit the oil lamp. When I looked back by the dim yellow light, Yun Yu had sat in the place where I had sat to eat meat earlier. He picked up the wine jar next to him and shook it. "There's still some left. May I drink it?"

I remembered a summer day just like this, years ago, when Yun Yu had come to my residence. When he was about to leave, the skies burst open without warning. Yun Yu had stood on the veranda and said, "It looks like I can't escape." I said, "This is heaven telling me to insist you stay. Only, I didn't prepare a banquet in advance." Yun Yu said with a smile, "Just as long as there's wine."

At the time, Huai Manor's cellar had been full of mature vintages. Not like now, when all I had left was half a jar of Chengzhou's Bamboo Leaf Green.

And Yun Yu then had not been the Yun Yu of now.

Just as the Liu Tongyi I beheld back then was only an illusion I had drawn in the air, and not the real Liu Tongyi, the Yun Yu of those days, the Yun Yu who was the only person who could have an idle chat with me, whose tastes agreed with mine, was also nothing but an illusion, an image of a man drawn on paper.

Only, the vision of Liu Tongyi was one I had drawn myself. The image of Yun Yu had been drawn for me by the real Yun Yu.

From beginning to end, it had all been false, and the illusion had long since dispersed, like a cloud, gone altogether, leaving no trace. Only a lingering impression remained in my mind.

Because for Jing Chengjun, there was no one to compare to that Suiya.

It was fitting. What real person could measure up to a drawing?

Jing Chengjun had been dead three years. True as this platitude might have been, it was meaningless.

Suiya, Suiya.

That day in prison, I had called to him for the last time. After that, there was no longer anyone I could call by that name.

I took two steps forward and saluted. "Your Excellency, might I ask if you are some important official? I couldn't see you clearly in the dark just now and slighted you. Pardon my rudeness. What can I do for you on this rainy night?"

Yun Yu slowly set the wine jar back on the table. The oil lamp in the room wasn't very bright. His expression was a little hazy.

I smiled and said, "If Your Excellency won't talk, I won't know how to react."

The men who had come with him were all standing outside on the veranda, their posture perfectly erect, their expressions capable; it was clear at a glance that they were guards. I received no answer from Yun Yu, so I said to those outside: "It's raining hard, why don't you all come inside?" I turned to find the kettle. "I have no hot water prepared and cannot brew tea right away. I will have to trouble you to wait awhile."

They continued to stand there with their backs straight, unmoving. Holding the kettle, I looked at them, then looked at Yun Yu. I said, "Gentlemen, we are strangers to each other, and I am only an honest trader. I think… you haven't come here to settle a score with me."

Yun Yu's eyes wavered as he looked at me; perhaps it was because the oil lamp was swaying in the wind. Had I made a lucky guess? Was he really here with these guards to arrest me and make me answer for my crimes?

Just as well. If he really did take me back, the worst of it would be another stay in the imperial prison. Prince Huai's big mausoleum was already built and contained a ready-made coffin for me to lie in.

I took the kettle to the water barrel and bent to scoop water. Yun Yu finally spoke, but it was addressed to the guards on the veranda: "You can all head back."

I straightened up and turned my head. The guards left. Shortly after, there came the sound of splashing. It was the boat Yun Yu had come in being rowed away.

Hadn't they left a little too fast? Their commissioner was still sitting here.

Holding the kettle, I spoke again to Yun Yu. "If Your Excellency has dismissed your attendants because you have something important to say, do speak openly."

Yun Yu still sat there, saying nothing.

He was much thinner than before. Hurrying to Chengzhou to manage the flooding, he must have had a weary journey. That was why he was so pale and exhausted. On his brow, I saw none of his former high spirits, but instead an appearance of melancholy.

Looking at him, I couldn't describe what I felt.

He had to have some aim in coming here like this. It might have appeared that Yun Yu did just what he pleased, but in reality, he considered every angle carefully, letting nothing slip. On his first night in Chengzhou, he had cast aside his duty as commissioner to come here, and neither the local officials nor his personal guards were doing anything about it. There had to be a reason.

Had he sent his guards away now, all the better to catch me later?

Sitting here alone, unspeaking, had he already prepared his trap? Was he waiting for me to fall for it?

Forget it, let him carry on how he liked. If he wouldn't talk, I would stop asking. I filled the kettle and went to the copper stove, temporarily moved the grilling rack aside onto a small table, and asked Yun Yu, "Why don't you sit over there for a bit? I'm going to change the coals and warm up a kettle of water. I don't want any specks of coal to leap out and soil your clothes."

Yun Yu finally spoke to me. "There's no need… to make me tea."

I picked up the poker and said politely, "How can I not serve tea to a guest?"

Yun Yu paused briefly, then said, "Can I have wine instead of tea?"

"Of course," I said, "but the wine isn't anything special, and certainly not fit for company. I'm afraid Your Excellency won't enjoy it. Your Excellency's clothes are damp from the rain and the nights are chilly. It would be better to drink some hot tea."

But as Commissioner Yun wanted wine, I wouldn't argue the matter. I put down the poker, found a clean cup, rinsed it with water, put it on the table in front of him, then refilled the wine pitcher.

Yun Yu immediately poured himself a cup and downed it in one gulp.

I changed the coal in the stove and lit it, then put the grilling rack back on top of it. I pulled over another stool to sit beside the stove. Yun Yu watched me roll up my sleeves and arrange slices of meat on the frame. Holding his wine cup, he looked startled.

"I really have nothing to eat with wine here," I said. "I can only serve you some slices of mutton. I hope Your Excellency won't find it too lacking."

The fire roared, and the meat on the rack sizzled. With a pair of chopsticks, I flipped the slices over one by one, then sprinkled on some salt, black pepper, and cumin. The whole time Yun Yu watched, unmoving, holding his wine cup. Soon the meat was done, and I put a few pieces on his plate. Seeing him still unmoving, I said, "This is how the herdsmen in the northern desert eat. Perhaps Your Excellency has never seen it before. It isn't strongly seasoned, but it also isn't very gamey. This is the only dish available in my humble abode. Please try it and see whether it suits your tastes."

Yun Yu picked up his chopsticks and was about to place a slice of meat onto the plate next to me. "No need to be polite," I said. "Please eat it yourself. I just had two meals and won't be able to eat anything else for a little while. I can't eat with you."

Yun Yu's hand hung in midair with the chopsticks. He paused, then drew back his hand and ate a slice of meat. He poured another cup of wine and again swallowed it in one gulp.

Eating the meat seemed to be causing him great anguish. I couldn't resist asking, "Does it taste all right? Is there too much salt?"

Yun Yu shook his head, and I seasoned the still-grilling meat. Yun Yu kept watching me grill, then finally spoke again. "Have you gone beyond the northern frontier?"

He was starting to ask after my whereabouts these last couple of years. Finally we were getting to the point.

"Yes," I said. "The scenery there is wonderful, fields of green grass blending into blue sky." I tapped the grill with my chopsticks. "I brought this contraption back from the north."

Yun Yu finally smiled. "What kind of business do you do?"

I answered truthfully: "Minor trade, picking some things up here and selling them there. I've dealt in furs and medicines and things of that nature. Oh, yes, has Your Excellency come to discuss a deal with me?"

Yun Yu was silent again. I added some more grilled meat to his plate. "The hour is late, and it's raining hard. Please speak plainly if you have business, Your Excellency. You may have a hard time getting back if you take too long."

Yun Yu's voice seemed very weak. "I didn't come here out of any ulterior motive. I just… I just wanted to come and see."

I feigned confusion. "That sounds like a joke. What did Your Excellency want to see?"

Yun Yu looked up at me, pressed his hands to his temples, and gave a bitter laugh. "Yes, I actually came here, and I'm sitting here, and I have food and drink, and I'm joking. I really am shameless."

"How can you say that?" I said. "I'm only a little surprised. Though Your Excellency will not state your purpose, you are still an honored guest. But it really is late. When will Your Excellency's men be coming?"

Yun Yu looked at me and said, "In the morning." He raised his wine cup. "Since I am still a guest tonight, I'll impose on you thoroughly."

What did he mean by loitering here? Any affection between us in the past had been a lie. He couldn't have come here to reminisce with me on that account.

More likely the commissioner had a heavy workload and could only come investigate me at night.

Yun Yu downed one cup after another, but his face remained white, without a trace of a flush. It distressed me to see him like this. He had his whole heart set on Qizhe and was always giving all he had. One couldn't work too hard and live properly; one needed to think of oneself.

Mutton caused excessive internal heat and was hard to digest, and drinking a lot of wine at night certainly wasn't beneficial. I put the last few slices of meat on Yun Yu's plate, put away the grill, and stoked up the fire to heat water.

When he had drunk nearly all the remaining wine, Yun Yu once again stared emptily at me, holding his wine cup.

I scooped up water to wash the grill. Yun Yu stood and walked over to the basin as if he wanted to help. Without even rolling up his sleeves, he reached for the water. I quickly stopped him. "No need to be polite, Your Excellency. I can do it. How could I make a guest wash up?"

Yun Yu still wanted to touch the grill. I added, "It's clear Your Excellency has never done this kind of work. I don't suppose you would be able to get it clean."

Finally, Yun Yu drew back his hands and stood by the basin without moving. He only went back to his chair when I told him to sit down.

By the time I had washed the grilling rack, the water was boiling. I remembered that I still had half a pot of porridge left over from this morning, so I brought it to the stove to warm it up and served a bowl to Yun Yu. The nights were cold, and he needed some plain hot porridge after all that meat and wine. If Commissioner Yun fell ill, that would be another mark against me.

While Yun Yu ate, I warmed up washing water in the big kettle and went to find a set of clean clothes. "Your Excellency's clothes are wet. You shouldn't wear them to pass the night. Change into these for now."

Yun Yu was quite cooperative. He did what I said. When the washing water was ready, I told him to go bathe, and he did. By the time he was finished, I had washed and put away all the dishes.

Yun Yu emerged from behind the screen in clean clothes, then once again stood there blankly. Once, his stature had been the same as mine. Wearing my clothes now, he looked even thinner, like a bamboo pole holding up a robe that hung empty and floating. Probably it was because of this that he didn't seem as lively as before.

"It's late," I said. "If Your Excellency truly has nothing urgent to say, you ought to retire for the night."

He had come to investigate me but was unwilling to speak openly; at any rate, he couldn't stand there staring until daybreak.

Yun Yu looked toward the bed. I'd originally had only this one bed, which wasn't large, and of course Commissioner Yun and I couldn't share. Fortunately, Bai Rujin had sent over another piece of furniture a few days back.

I said to Yun Yu, "Please go ahead and lie down, Your Excellency. I still haven't washed."

Yun Yu once again looked at me and at the bed, then walked over to it and sat down. I put a kettle of tea on the bedside table and told him where the chamber pot and commode were. When I had my washing water ready and glanced into the inner room, Yun Yu had already lain down to sleep. The outer robe he had removed was

on the chair, neatly folded.

When I was through washing and looked into the inner room again, Yun Yu was lying peacefully in bed. I didn't know whether he was asleep. In spite of myself, I wanted to sigh. It had once been my fondest wish to have someone to keep me company by lamplight at night, to have someone to join me in bed. Unfortunately, I had only ever had emptiness.

I shut up all the doors and windows. Yun Yu rolled over in bed. I went to the outer room and moved the reclining chair by the wall into a larger space and unfolded it; just like that, I had a bamboo couch to sleep on. Because it had been raining for several days, the nights were so chilly it didn't feel like summer. I couldn't just sleep on a bamboo couch like this, so I went to the closet and took out two thin quilts: one to spread on the bed and one to use as a cover. Next, I put down a cooling pillow. That would be more than sufficient to make do for the night.

I unfolded the screen between the inner and outer rooms, extinguished the oil lamp, and lay down on the bamboo couch. The house was pitch dark and utterly silent.

After I know not how much time passed, I actually fell asleep and slept the whole night without dreams.

Early the next morning, when I awoke, Yun Yu was already up. He had changed back into the clothes he had worn yesterday and was standing at the window. It was light, the morning sun shining in. As it shone on him, I thought for a moment that I was dreaming.

Yun Yu cast down his eyes. "Pardon me for imposing last night."

"It was my pleasure," I said politely.

We stood across from each other and could find nothing to say. Soon, a boat came to the gate. The people standing in the boat silently bowed to Yun Yu and saluted.

Yun Yu looked into my eyes. "I'll be taking my leave."

"Stay safe, Your Excellency," I said.

Yun Yu stood there looking at me a while longer, then turned. I watched him board the boat, watched the boat slowly depart.

Not long after Yun Yu left, the Bai family's boat came as well. And standing on it was Bai Rujin.

Bai Rujin came inside, looked around, and quietly said to me, "Young fellow, I just happened to run into that boat coming from your place. I thought my servants must have been mistaken and didn't know what they were talking about, but it turns out it's true." He looked around again and said in an even lower voice, "It seems the person who came to see you last night is important."

"Imperial Commissioner Yun Yu," I said.

Bai Rujin gave a start and stared at me. "Young fellow, you really know how to keep things to yourself. Since when have you been friends with Vice-Minister Yun?"

I sighed lengthily. "We aren't friends. There is an old quarrel between us."

Bai Rujin gave another start. I said, "I cannot explain, but I'm afraid I am in for a bit of trouble. I'd like you to take me to see someone, Bai-xiong."

The Bai family's little boat moved quickly. After a series of twists and turns through the streets, we finally stopped in front of the Gracious Reception Inn.

I went inside and asked the manager for information. An attendant took me to the door of one of the principal rooms and knocked.

Shortly after, the door opened. Liu Tongyi stood there blankly. I went right inside and bolted the door. "Master Mei, I have something important to ask of you. I hope you will agree."

A trace of confusion appeared in Liu Tongyi's eyes. "Go ahead, Master Zhao."

"I suppose you are leaving Chengzhou on your own ship," I said.

Liu Tongyi nodded.

I said, "I want to leave Chengzhou in secret. Might I join you?"

Liu Tongyi considered in silence for a while, then said, "All right."

He must have already heard the news that Yun Yu was here, but he didn't ask, and he didn't say anything.

I said, "Thank you, Chancellor Liu."

But Liu Tongyi only smiled and said, "Master Zhao is too polite." He said nothing more.

For some reason, I was feeling sheepish. "Well, Chancellor… Master…" I didn't know how to address him. "When are you planning to set out?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that, Master Zhao?" said Liu Tongyi. "When do you want to leave?"

"The sooner the better," I said at once. Even better if it could be today.

"Well, at the earliest, it will be two or three days from now," Liu Tongyi said. "The commissioner has come to manage the flooding and has temporarily sealed the

waterways in and out of Chengzhou in order to survey the area. Otherwise I would have left yesterday instead of delaying here for a few days."

So that was it. I considered it. A delay of two or three days would still leave me plenty of time to spare, so I said to Liu Tongyi, "Then we will leave once the waterways are open. Thank you, Master Mei."

Liu Tongyi was still calling me Master Zhao. He must have been telling me that the events of the past, the man named Jing Weiyi, no longer existed for him. How I had escaped, what I had been doing these last few years—he wasn't going to ask about any of it.

He was always capable of exercising perfect tact, leaving the perfect amount of leeway. This was why I appreciated Liu Tongyi.

Liu Tongyi also invited me to take tea with him and discuss arrangements concerning the upcoming purchase of ambergold silk. All the steps had been suitably planned out. I cared for nothing but reaching Java and planned to give the ambergold silk to Liu Tongyi and forget about it, just as long as Bai-xiong got a nice dividend in the process.

But Liu Tongyi said seriously that this was not possible. Things had to be done right, and business was business. He had come to make a profit, but he didn't want to take advantage. He added, "Regardless of where you wish to go, it can't hurt you to make some money to convert into more cash to have on hand. As the saying goes, one should be frugal at home but well-supplied on the road."

I had to put aside my original plans. Smiling, I said, "No wonder Master Mei was able to grow his business to this extent in a few short years. You are trustworthy and loyal—in a few years, there will be hardly any merchants in Jiangnan to measure up to Master Mei."

Liu Tongyi smiled faintly. "I'm merely doing my best to run a business. But thank you for your good wishes, Master Zhao."

I sat awhile longer. I had meant to invite Liu Tongyi to eat, as I would need him to look after me on the road in a few days. But Liu Tongyi seemed to have something else to do, and he seemed to be waiting for someone. Perhaps he had arranged a business negotiation. So I rose and bade him farewell.

Just as I was about to turn and leave, there came two sudden knocks at the door. I was near it, so I opened it, and was immediately surprised. The head of the group outside the door was also startled.

It was Yun Yu.

A few people stood behind him: the guards who had picked him up this morning, as well as a pudgy man in a satin robe. Him, I knew—he was Chengzhou's prefect, Ma Jingru. When I had first come to Chengzhou, Bai Rujin had introduced me, and I had given him some gifts.

All kinds of ideas surged up in my mind, but Yun Yu put on a thin smile. "So, Mister Zhao is here."

An expression of realization appeared on Prefect Ma's face. "So the expert in flood management that Lord Yun went to visit last night was this…" He looked me up and down a couple of times. "This Mister Zhao." Then he glanced at Liu Tongyi. "Then can this be Mister Mei?" Smoothing his beard, he took on a look of complacency. "Two experts in flood management, here in this city. Heaven has truly blessed the imperial commissioner's efforts!"

"It is because of His Majesty's wisdom that heaven has granted us favor," said Yun Yu dully. Then he raised his hands toward Liu Tongyi and me and said, "No need to observe the formalities, gentlemen. Lord Ma and I have come again to ask for instruction on the subject of flood management."

Yun Yu must not yet have told Prefect Ma of my identity, and had even made up a plausible explanation for last night. But the fact that he hadn't revealed this matter to Prefect Ma did not mean that he hadn't written it in a note and then dispatched that note on the person of a guard who had already left Chengzhou by a fast boat and was even now on the road to the capital.

Liu Tongyi took a stack of papers from his desk and passed them to Yun Yu. "This is what we spoke of yesterday, my family's knowledge of flood management. I do not know whether it will be useful to Lord Yun. I don't know a thing about the subject myself, so there is no further help I can offer."

Yun Yu accepted the papers, flipped through them, and tucked them away in his own sleeve. "Thank you."

Liu Tongyi smiled.

I stood by looking on, but Yun Yu didn't give me another look. His manner was completely different from last night. There was a biting chill in it. The aristocratic ease that had come so naturally years ago was gone without a trace, and the official might he subtly exuded was very powerful.

Prefect Ma lifted his sleeves and said, "Thank you both for your surpassing efforts in support of Chengzhou's flood management. I will host you this afternoon at the local government offices for a banquet as a show of gratitude…"

Before he could finish, when a refusal was already on the tip of my tongue, Yun Yu interrupted him, "Misters Zhao and Mei are both of a somewhat unsociable disposition. They particularly dislike banquets and social gatherings. I will think of a way to thank them another day. There is no need for Prefect Ma to go to the trouble."

Naturally, Prefect Ma obeyed without question.

Yun Yu's gaze finally swept over me, then fell on Liu Tongyi. He said, "Thank you for your help, gentlemen, I have imposed on you both. I will not come disturb you again. I will first bid farewell and convey my gratitude later." Then he departed with his attendants and Prefect Ma, leaving behind an open door and the countless curious, prying gazes of attendants and guests in the corridor.

Liu Tongyi closed the door and said, "Lord Yun became aware of my presence in Chengzhou not long after I arrived. I met with him yesterday. My father once engaged in flood management and left notes behind on his experiences. I have read them, but I do not have them with me, so I wrote down what I remembered to hand over to Lord Yun today."

I hadn't suspected Liu Tongyi to begin with. Given Yun Yu's thoroughness, after seeing me on the boat, he would immediately have screened all the merchants coming into Chengzhou. If he could find me, he could certainly find the newly arrived Liu Tongyi. Liu Tongyi's business was so large that his identity must be known to everyone from Qizhe to Yun Yu.

Yun Yu must have anticipated that I would come see Liu Tongyi. I hoped that he would do as he had just hinted and let me go.

Though my hopes weren't high.

All I could do was keep walking forward and hope that things would turn out all right. I was even regretting that I had come to Liu Tongyi for help. I had given him a scare when I faked my death, and now I didn't know whether I would cause more difficulties for him.

I owed him so many favors that it was hard to know how to repay them.

In the boat on the way back to my house from the inn, I spent the trip pondering again.

What I didn't especially understand at present was what Yun Yu was doing.

I had been unable to see through him three years ago, and now I certainly had no idea.

He had spent the night at my house, and his manner had been strange, his words and actions all greatly altered. I did not know what he wanted.

I asked myself whether I still loved him, and the answer was that I did.

But love was love, and facts were facts. What I wanted more was to live the rest of my life freely. I couldn't face another round of torment.

In fact, while Yun Yu was lying in bed last night, I lay on the bamboo couch and sighed to myself.

Jing Chengjun had borne the reputation of being licentious, yet I had been so prudish back then; I really hadn't touched Yun Yu *or* Liu Tongyi.

Once I went to Java, I would be unlikely to see anyone like Yun Yu and Liu Tongyi in a savage place like that. Perhaps for the rest of my life, there would be nothing but simple and passionate exotic flings.

Though I was quite looking forward to that, for whatever reason, I still couldn't resist sighing.

Alas…

After I returned to the house, at midday, an official really did come to make a delivery. He said this was Commissioner Yun's gift to Mister Zhao to thank him for his pointers on flood management.

It was a square box containing a small jar of wine, a wine pitcher, and two cups. I opened the jar and sniffed. It was a mature Yuqiong wine.

I couldn't help but smile. Yun Yu's habit of collecting hadn't changed. He liked wines with elegant names, of respectable age; even the jars had to be sufficiently fashionable and well-crafted. He seemed to keep them for the sake of keeping them, not to drink them.

But when he needed to give someone a gift, they were ready to hand. It was quite convenient.

Yet this set of drinking vessels didn't match Yun Yu's usual exquisite style. They were quite simple. Two willow branches were painted on the pitcher, and two slanting willow leaves on the cups.

I casually asked the courier for the name of the drinking vessels; they were called Willow Leaf Intoxication.

I wondered where the commissioner had picked them up.

When the courier was gone, I put away the wine and drinking vessels. I was just deciding what to eat for lunch when Bai Rujin arrived in front of the house in a fast

boat. From his expression, I knew yet another problem was coming my way.

Sure enough, without even coming inside, Bai Rujin waved to me from the bow of the boat beyond the railing. "Hop in, young fellow, a relative's come to see you. He's waiting at the shop."

I sensed the impending crash of a hammer onto my head.

"What relative?" I asked.

Bai Rujin scratched his scalp. "He says he's your nephew."

When I got on the boat, Bai Rujin kept rambling: "Your poor nephew. Just look at the boy, coming all this way through the flood just to see you. I hope there's no family emergency. Chengzhou is sealed off on all sides. He said he had to beg the guards for ages before he could get in…"

At the door to the shop, I stepped from the boat onto the second-floor corridor and immediately spotted the figure inside.

When I got a clear look at him, I froze. Then I sighed in relief, but my astonishment was still greater.

He launched himself at me, excited and elated. "Uncle! It really is you! It really is *you*?"

My temples began to twitch uncontrollably.

When I saw that figure, the first thought that popped into my head was—

Qitan, have you finally spent all the rest of my money in Henan?

Chapter Eight

Qitan and I sat in a small, airy room on Jiqing Lane.

He sipped his wine, then brought it up to his nose and sniffed. "The wine is better than I expected from a little place like Chengzhou. This Huadiao is truly unique."

"That's Bamboo Leaf Green," I said.

Qitan looked astonished. "It isn't Huadiao? Why does Bamboo Leaf Green taste like Huadiao?"

"Because it's Chengzhou's style of Bamboo Leaf Green," I said.

His face still a picture of disbelief, Qitan tasted a whole cup, exclaiming again and again. Then he put the empty cup back down on the table. "Uncle, where have you been all these years?"

"Oh, all over the place, just roaming."

Qitan seemed to hesitate. Then he said with a smile, "I didn't think you would acknowledge me, Uncle. I'd only meant to come and take a look. If you'd looked at me cluelessly and asked who I was, I would have left."

Even you're *here,* I thought to myself. *If I still refused to admit anything, it would be much too unreasonable.*

Qitan hesitated again, then said, "Uncle, you might have guessed that I actually came with Yun Yu."

I inclined my head slightly.

Qitan continued, "We came at my imperial brother's behest. Yun Yu is to act out in the open, primarily to manage the flooding, but we've also come with another important assignment. I'm here in secret for precisely that reason."

I remained composed and listened to him continue.

Qitan paused. "I… and Yun Yu were both issued a command by my imperial brother, telling us to bring a certain person back with us… You must have already guessed who that person is…"

The words were already in my throat—

Qitan, though you called Uncle and your uncle answered, the uncle sitting here in front of you is only a merchant, nothing to do with that treacherous prince now sleeping inside a

tomb. Do you understand?

I drank my wine calmly, and Qitan said, "It seems you *have* guessed, so I'll stop beating around the bush." He knocked on his forehead with an anguished look and sighed lengthily. "That's right, that person is Liu Tongyi. My imperial brother wants to ask Liu Tongyi to come back and be imperial chancellor again."

"I think my imperial brother's decision is truly wise beyond compare," said Qitan with a grimace. "I approve of it wholeheartedly. Zhang Ping… Ugh! Zhang Ping…"

"What's wrong with Zhang Ping?" I couldn't resist asking.

I recalled Zhang Ping being quite upright and incorruptible. He had accomplished a great deal at the Court of Judicial Review, solving cases deftly and speedily, his actions even more vigorous and resolute than Liu Tongyi's in the same post.

"That's right," said Qitan bleakly, "you've been happily wandering far and wide. You don't know what we've been suffering in the capital. Zhang Ping… He *is* a good official. But he really is only suited to the Ministry of Justice or the Court of Judicial Review. He's simply not fit to be imperial chancellor."

According to Qitan, during the years Zhang Ping had been imperial chancellor, the whole court had been imbued with the grimness of a Court of Judicial Review interrogation. Even Qizhe, when he came to court every day and saw Zhang Ping standing at the head of the officials, felt as if he were on trial.

Solving cases had become an addiction for Zhang Ping, especially peculiar cases like family massacres, violent murders, and so on. When he had served in the Ministry of Justice, in addition to examining new cases, he had buried himself in old files and dug up all the peculiar old unsolved cases to reinvestigate, and even reinvestigated cases that had been wrongly decided and resulted in a miscarriage of justice. This had implicated certain courtiers, giving him a reputation for being honorable that spread far and wide. After Liu Tongyi became imperial chancellor, Zhang Ping was promoted to chamberlain of the Court of Judicial Review. Based on popularity and public acclaim, and especially his reputation among the common people, Zhang Ping was the greatest of all the officials. After Liu Tongyi resigned his position, most of the candidates to become imperial chancellor after him were decades his senior. Only Zhang Ping was of similar age to his predecessor and popular, with an impressive record.

Apparently, when deliberations about Zhang Ping's appointment had still been underway, Zhang Ping had earnestly declined several times. He wished to dedicate his whole life to the Court of Judicial Review. At the time, Qizhe and all the officials

had taken this for false modesty, a necessary affectation. The night the edict came down with the appointment, Zhang Ping sat in the office of the Court of Judicial Review till daybreak, weeping over the files.

As Qitan spoke, I remembered that when I had still been the treacherous Prince Huai, Zhang Ping had once come to Huai Manor on my birthday to deliver a gift. He said solemnly to me that bladed weapons hanging on the walls shouldn't be sharpened, that it would be easy for assassins to hide in the big vases by the walls, that my nightly patrols needed nets to dredge the water features, and that Huai Manor's encircling wall should be a little taller. He had looked at me with eyes filled with anticipation of my assassination. When it came time for him to bid farewell and depart, his gaze lingered significantly on the rose trellis, as if he hoped that some assassins would leap out from its shelter, or perhaps that he could get a shovel and dig up a corpse from underneath it. I thought at the time that this Lord Zhang really was too forthright. I might be a treacherous prince, but he still didn't have to be so obvious about hoping I'd be murdered on my birthday. Now it seemed that he was always like that, and I was being paranoid.

Qitan said that when Liu Tongyi was imperial chancellor, it had been all gentle sunshine and spring breezes at court; when Zhang Ping took over, it was all chilly winds. The year before last at least Qitan had been serving diligently in Henan; he hadn't been at court and hadn't had anything to do with Zhang Ping. When he had returned last year, bringing the antiques his "diligent service" had turned up to show off to Qizhe, Zhang Ping just happened to be present, and Qizhe had casually asked him to appraise them. Zhang Ping had then suggested three or more bloody histories for each antique—all murders, miscarriages of justice, unsolved cases—and scared Qitan's wife and some young princesses listening from behind a screen to tears. That night, when they came home, Princess Dai had lost her temper at Qitan. She insisted on having a Daoist priest come in to perform a cleansing ritual, and insisted that Qitan throw away those haunted things, or else she was leaving him, taking the children, and going back to her parents' house.

"I still have no peace at home," Qitan said bitterly. "Oh, right. What Zhang Ping was most interested in was you, Uncle Jun."

He spoke more and more loquaciously and was now even calling me Uncle Jun. I didn't bother telling him that he was wrong, and he ought to be calling me Uncle Wang or Uncle Cai.

Qitan continued, "I don't know if he was doing it on purpose or not, but Zhang Ping kept bringing you up over and over in front of my imperial brother, Uncle.

One day he'd say that you might not be dead, that the whole thing was a hoax, and so on and so on. And then not long after that, he'd say that you probably were dead, because of such and such, and the examination of the body hadn't turned up such and such. When Eldest Imperial Uncle first woke up and the whole truth came out, he advised that those ashes be examined. He said that the ashes of a person who had been poisoned were different. When it came time to relocate the grave, Yun Yu was responsible for it, and Zhang Ping went to Yun Yu and asked whether he could scoop up some ashes to examine them. Nearly annoyed Yun Yu to death. My imperial brother was ready to have him dragged out and beheaded. Well, anyway, a lot was happening then."

Qitan looked up at me. "Actually, Imperial Uncle, why didn't you tell anyone but Eldest Imperial Uncle about this business back then? Even if you were afraid my imperial brother wouldn't be able to conceal it from the empress dowager, you still might have told someone else."

"All of this is ancient history," I said. "Let it go."

Qitan looked at me. "You're right." Then, with a sudden smile, he said, "It's a good thing Zhang Ping has been going back and forth all these years, saying you might not be dead or that you really were dead. That's the only reason I didn't take you for a ghost and jump out of my skin when I saw you in the boat."

He served himself some food, poured himself another cup of Chengzhou's Bamboo Leaf Green, and drank a bit. "Uncle, what are you planning to do now?"

"I'm a merchant," I said. "I think I'll go on roaming far and wide."

Qitan said, haltingly, "But… the fact that I've met you… even if I don't say anything… Yun Yu must have…"

This brat was getting craftier by the day. Even Yun Yu was covering for me, but he had come running to the shop with a crowd of secret guards, those from the capital and those dispatched locally alike, and called me Uncle right in front of Bai Rujin. Bai Rujin hadn't noticed anything at the time, but given his connection to the prefect, if he asked a few questions, he was sure to get the gist. And here he was looking innocent and putting the blame on Yun Yu.

"We can come back to that later," I said. "We haven't seen each other in years. We ought to drink a few more cups."

Qitan said, "Uncle, you aren't mad at me for rushing over here thoughtlessly and giving your identity away, are you… I did hesitate, but I thought that since Yun Yu spent the night at your place yesterday, and Liu Tongyi must have known already, there was no way it could be concealed…"

"Liu Tongyi only found out after reaching Chengzhou, about the same time as the two of you," I said.

The words "must have known already" were rich with implication; I would first clarify matters on Liu Tongyi's behalf to avoid getting him in trouble.

Qitan looked at me and gave a bitter laugh. "Uncle, there is one thing Zhang Ping was right about. If you really weren't dead, you wouldn't trust anyone." He picked up his wine cup and drained it in one gulp.

After three pitchers of wine, Qitan was beginning to slur a little. He said pitifully to me, "Uncle, there's something I've been keeping bottled up that I have to tell you about. You always used to feel bad because you were suspected, but you weren't alone. For example, they actually suspected me more than you. My imperial brother and I are brothers after all… My imperial father favored my mother, and you doted on me when I was little… It only got better after I'd spent all my money on antiques and everyone decided I was a spendthrift. And you were the only one willing to lend me money, even at the risk of rousing suspicion… You'd think everyone wanted to be emperor. But my imperial brother really is a good emperor, and he's really nice to all us brothers… What I think is, you can't always be thinking about gloomy things like that… You just have to be happy…"

I lifted my wine cup. "I'm quite a bit older than you, but my views on this subject fall short of yours. I honor you for that speech."

Qitan giggled and said, "Uncle, I'm only telling the truth." But his eyes were drifting over to the place he had been constantly staring at ever since he and I had met. "After this cup, will you take that bone hairpin out of your hair and let me see it? It looks pretty old. Is it some foreign relic?"

When we left the restaurant, Qitan was stumbling a little. The secret guards who had followed him did their duty admirably, staying ambushed nearby and leaving me to prop him up by myself.

Qitan wasn't going back to the government office. If he went to see Liu Tongyi in his current condition, instead of talking him into anything, he was more likely to send him running from the reek of alcohol. I had no choice but to haul him onto the Bai family's boat and return to my little house.

When I pulled Qitan onto the second-floor corridor, he looked around with glazed eyes. "What an unusual-looking latrine."

I nearly let go and allowed him to topple over the railing and into the water. "This is where Uncle lives now."

Qitan rubbed his eyes. "You live in a latrine?" He pointed at the wooden barrel I kept my water in. "Uncle, why do you have a stove next to the commode? Is it so you don't catch a chill while going at night?"

I'd been planning to send him off to the bed, but when I heard this, I knew he was drunk out of his senses. Therefore, I once again unfolded the bamboo couch Bai Rujin had sent and dropped Qitan onto it. I stuck a pillow under his head. Qitan rolled over and immediately fell asleep.

I lit a fire and heated a kettle of tea, then sat inside sipping tea and checking my accounts, waiting for Yun Yu or someone from the local government to come pick up Qitan. Eventually, I also got tired and went to bed to nap through the afternoon. In the evening, Commissioner Yun finally came in a little boat.

Qitan was awake, but he wasn't planning to leave. He wanted dinner.

Yun Yu sent his guards to get some porridge and side dishes. Qitan and I sat at the table, but Yun Yu stood by. I said, "Please come eat with us, Lord Yun."

"I have already had dinner," Yun Yu said calmly. "Thank you, Master Zhao."

After eating, Qitan finally left with Yun Yu. He didn't appear the next day. I figured that he had gone to lobby Liu Tongyi.

The day after that was when Liu Tongyi and I had arranged to discuss the logistics of purchasing the silk. In the morning, Liu Tongyi arrived at the shop as arranged. Bai Rujin brought out his ledger and first verified the count, then settled the price and delivery arrangements. Bai Rujin must have already learned something. His manner was a little different from before. Instead of genially calling me "young fellow" at every turn, he was now a little reserved. Liu Tongyi, however, behaved as usual, still acting the part of Master Mei.

When we had paused after a lengthy discussion to drink some tea, while Bai Rujin went to use the latrine, I smiled and said to Liu Tongyi, "I hear Master Mei had a guest come by recently who wanted to convince you to go into a different trade."

"Master Zhao is well-informed," Liu Tongyi said, smiling. "I find my current trade congenial and have no intention of going into another one for the time being."

"Very good," I said. "I was worried that Master Mei would change professions and wasn't planning on transporting me anymore."

Holding his teacup, Liu Tongyi said, "Master Zhao's transport is a major transaction. Am I likely to renege on my promise?"

I saluted grandly and said with a smile, “With Master Mei’s promise, I am as confident as Kongming borrowing the eastern wind.”

“There is no call to borrow the eastern wind,” Liu Tongyi said languidly. “A southerly wind is rising, and the floodwaters are falling. The day after tomorrow, we can set out.”

The next day, Bai Rujin did not visit. Qitan must have gone to be a mouthpiece and had no time to come, so I was free to pack my things at home.

I had gone far and wide over the last few years and was accustomed to traveling light. As long as I had money, I would be able to buy anything I needed. I would certainly bring none of the things I had purchased in Chengzhou.

I packed two changes of clothes and gathered up all my money. I picked out a few of the local baubles I had bought in various places over the years. Qitan would probably enjoy the rest, so I left them in the closet, confident that he would find them.

The drinking vessels Yun Yu had given me were inconvenient to bring along, but he had gone to the trouble of giving them to me, after all. It wouldn’t look good to leave them behind. I found some pieces of soft cloth, wrapped them up, and shoved them into my travel bag. And that was it for packing.

At midday I took the Bai family’s boat out to eat. After returning, I lay in bed and took a midday nap. I felt quite emotional. I had bought a house, made myself a nest at last; I’d thought I could settle down for a little while. Now I had to start drifting again.

It was my destiny to lead the life of a drifter.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a person in the outer room. It gave me a start.

He was dressed casually, sitting at the table. It was Yun Yu.

I stood up and straightened my clothes. “When did you arrive, Lord Yun? However did you find time among all your cares to come to my humble abode?”

Yun Yu stood from the table. “I arrived recently. I saw you were asleep, so I did not disturb you. I hope you will forgive me.”

Smiling, I said, “It’s no problem, Lord Yun.” I went to the outer room and lit the stove to heat a kettle of water, then pulled up a chair at the table. “Please sit, Lord Yun. Tea will take a moment.”

Yun Yu sat across from me. “Master Zhao leaves the door open while sleeping. Are you not afraid of thieves?”

"You're joking, Lord Yun," I said. "I'm a single man and empty-handed. The thieves wouldn't come if I invited them."

Smiling, Yun Yu said, "You're the one who's joking, Master Zhao. You are a major merchant who has traveled far and wide, with ample property. How can you call yourself empty-handed? You packed your bags this morning. Are you planning to travel for business?"

I had thought that my heart wouldn't sink, but when I heard his final question, I still felt it drop.

I smiled as well. "Thank you for taking the time to check up on me, Lord Yun. I was only cleaning up. I suppose your men don't have very good eyesight."

Yun Yu sat slouched at the table, looking at me. "Where are you going?"

"Are you interrogating me, Lord Yun? Or merely asking?" The atmosphere grew slightly rigid. Just then, the water on the stove boiled. Smiling, I said, "I'm joking. Don't take offense, Lord Yun." I stood and picked up the copper kettle. I extinguished the fire, brought out a teapot and teacups, and brewed tea.

As I was rinsing the cups, Yun Yu's voice came slowly from behind me. "If Your Highness Prince Huai leaves again, things will be very awkward."

I turned around and sat back down at the table. I laid out the cups and poured tea. Yun Yu slowly went on: "There are secret guards near this house. I positioned them yesterday. After Your Highness encountered His Highness Prince Dai, it was only natural for me to make these arrangements. There were no guards before, though I suppose Your Highness won't believe that." He laughed softly. "At any rate, I've never done anything good."

Perhaps I ought to have a proper chat with Yun Yu today.

Now that I thought about it, he and I had never actually spoken the truth out in the open. So I sighed and said, "Yun Yu, let us speak openly."

When I spoke the name "Yun Yu," the expression of the man across from me changed abruptly. His brow eased a great deal. While his expression was admittedly still solemn, it was the familiar gravity with which Yun Yu had used to discuss serious affairs.

I got right to the point. "Yun Yu, are you here today because you are planning to keep me in Chengzhou?"

"I am not so bold," said Yun Yu. "Your Highness may say all you like that Prince Huai has been dead for three years, but as far as I am concerned, the person sitting in front of me is still His Majesty's uncle. In all the world, no one but His Majesty would dare to keep Your Highness anywhere. Your Highness ought to know that a

lackey like me would not commit such an offense unless acting under orders. But since Your Highness and Prince Dai have met and recognized each other, there is no way for this to remain unknown to His Majesty. If Your Highness leaves now, and leaves with Liu Tongyi, it will likely cause trouble and embarrassment for many people, Liu Tongyi included. I am only being honest. If I have been disrespectful, I hope Your Highness will make allowances."

I nodded. "All you say is indeed reasonable. I will reconsider leaving."

I picked up my tea and drank. Since we were speaking openly, some things came out of my mouth spontaneously. "You've changed a great deal, Yun Yu."

Yun Yu held back his sleeve and picked up his cup. "So has Your Highness."

"Traveling far and wide naturally weathers one's face."

"Being at court exposes one to all manner of attacks."

I was silent. His position was an awkward one. It was easy to imagine what his lot had been at court these past few years. So I asked, "Is Grand Tutor Yun well?"

Yun Yu was silent awhile, then nodded slowly and said that he was. After three years of cultivating his mind in a temple, he had calmed a great deal.

I had meant to ask about Qizhe as well, but asking Yun Yu might have been taken for an insinuation, so I changed the subject again. "When you stayed here the other night, I refused to acknowledge my identity only because I did not wish difficulties to arise once again because of the past. In fact, there were things I wanted to say to you then."

Yun Yu looked intently at me. I said, "Years ago, while I was defeated by the plans His Majesty, Liu Tongyi, and you yourself had made, before that I was plotting against you and your father. So you and I are even. If I had told His Majesty the truth earlier, later circumstances would not have arisen. Therefore, there need be no debate over right and wrong, and there is no call to take offense."

Yun Yu's expression went through several alterations. He seemed to want to say something, then stopped himself. Finally, he smiled and said, "After all these years away from the palace, Your Highness's mind is truly as open as the sea and sky."

"It is true that going so many places has given me a fresh understanding of the vastness of the world compared to the insignificance of a man," I said. Then I spoke a little of some of the places I had been over the last few years, and got out the local specialties that I hadn't packed up and had meant to leave to Qitan and showed them to him.

An oxhorn cup, a gemstone pendant, sheep-bone dice, small stone carvings… Yun Yu looked at each one avidly, but at last, he picked up a piece of cloth I had used to

wrap the dice, unfolded it, and smiled without speaking.

I saw something strange in his smile. I looked at the cloth again and saw that it was only an old and wrinkled coarsely made piece of patterned fabric; I didn't understand what he was seeing.

Yun Yu spread the piece of cloth flat on the table, turned it around, and pushed it up in front of me. He pointed at one particular place.

In the corner where he pointed, I saw a crookedly embroidered mess. Looking more closely, it seemed to be small writing:

For my beloved Cai-lang, do not forget. Mija.

It looked like the gift that girl from Goryeo, Kim Mija, had given me before I left…

And those words… seemingly, she had asked me to teach her to write them…

And I had given her a five-character quatrain in answer. After I read it to her, she was so moved that she wept bitterly and said that she had never heard anything more beautiful than this poem.

Then a ripple surged up in my heart, and I said insincerely that this piece of cloth was the most beautiful embroidery I had ever seen, and I had folded it away over my careworn heart, which felt a moment's solace.

Oh, the events of the past…

The corners of Yun Yu's lips tipped up. He said, "It seems this was quite the romantic affair. Neither the cloth nor the embroidery technique seem to belong to this country. It must have been a foreign romantic affair."

A little embarrassed, I said, "Merely a young lady I found congenial." I had seen him admire the oxhorn cup earlier, so I offered it to him and said, "I received a set of drinking vessels from you a couple of days ago. Why don't I give you this in return?"

Yun Yu froze. "That's… most polite, Your Highness." He refused for a while, but I pressed it on him, so he accepted.

This talk seemed to have completely dispersed the emotional frustration brought about by the events that had taken place years ago. Yun Yu's awkwardness on the night he had spent here had gradually given way to a more natural manner. After a few more exchanges, he stood and bade farewell, but before leaving, he asked me, "On what day had Your Highness planned to depart?"

Because this concerned Liu Tongyi, I did not give an honest answer, only said, "In a few days."

Yun Yu said nothing else. He boarded his boat and left.

That evening, I went to see Liu Tongyi and said that we could forget about what I had asked him for. I wasn't leaving.

After hearing me out, Liu Tongyi asked, "Does Master Zhao not want to leave, or do you feel unable to leave?"

I froze. Then I said that naturally I wanted to leave as soon as possible, but it seemed leaving wasn't going to be so easy.

"The authorities have issued a decree permitting free movement in and out of Chengzhou starting tomorrow, with no further restrictions," Liu Tongyi said calmly. "What difficulty could there be in two traveling merchants like Master Zhao and myself leaving?"

"I am afraid of causing trouble for you, Ransi."

Liu Tongyi raised his eyelids and looked at me. "It makes no difference whether you go or not."

At these words, everything suddenly became clear.

I had already brought Liu Tongyi down with me. It really was all the same whether I went or not.

So I immediately took the boat, first to see Bai Rujin and give him a brief explanation. I only told him that a deal had come up, and I was leaving all matters in Chengzhou in his hands. Then I returned to the little house, took my luggage, and boarded Liu Tongyi's merchant ship.

It was indeed extremely easy for the ship to leave Chengzhou. The guards let us pass without even a cursory inspection. Yun Yu and Qitan were probably still in dreamland, not yet out of bed.

As the sky began to lighten, Liu Tongyi's ship sped through the water with the wind at its back, carrying me away from Chengzhou.

Chapter Nine

The flooding around Chengzhou had disrupted the waterways. After we left the city, we first had to go a ways north and turn into another river, then travel southeast in order to avoid the floodwaters.

Liu Tongyi's merchant ship was swift, and the wind was in our favor as we traveled north. Approaching nightfall, we had already reached the intersection of the two rivers. We moored at a pier in a town called Rivermeet to pass the night. We would be back on our way early the next morning.

Rivermeet was quite an affluent little town. Because of its convenient position on the waterways, merchants coming from all directions used it as a place to drop anchor and rest while traveling. Merchant ships of all sizes were packed tightly at the pier, on which all kinds of little stands were set up. Some little dinghies hawked their wares among the ships, though the prices were steeply marked up—five coins for a mantou, fifteen for tea leaves.

Liu Tongyi said that all the vendors on the pier fleeced their customers like this, and that prices were slightly better in the town itself. All of Rivermeet's markets stayed open throughout the night, which was as busy as day. I was feeling a little stifled after spending all day aboard ship, so I went for a walk around town with him.

The town was indeed quite prosperous, with all kinds of stalls crammed elbow to elbow along the streets, the majority of them put up temporarily by traveling merchants who were passing through taking advantage of their resting time to sell off some of the knickknacks they had picked up in the course of transporting their shipments. One little street embraced all four corners of the world, from the desert to Jiangnan, from the capital to foreign parts—they had everything.

The shops lining both sides of the street were sumptuously decorated. Listening to the accents in which their proprietors solicited customers, I heard the Rivermeet Town locals and all kinds of outsiders. Looking along the street, the businesses were mainly of three kinds: restaurants, bathhouses, and brothels. This was in keeping with the towns I had passed through in the course of my business. A ship's stores were limited, after all, and the fare was monotonous, and while there was water all

around, bathing wasn't as convenient as on land. When merchants who traveled the waterways came ashore, the majority of them went straight to a restaurant to eat to their heart's content, then to a bathhouse to soak in hot water to their satisfaction, and finally to a brothel to relax and enjoy themselves.

Liu Tongyi and I spent a while wandering the streets, then went into a restaurant that still had an empty table, which happened to be in a quiet corner of the second floor, next to a window. While we were ordering, I said to Liu Tongyi, "You must let me pay for this meal to thank you for bringing me along."

Liu Tongyi didn't refuse. He smiled and said, "Then I won't insist."

I already knew that he liked spicy food and didn't have any particular aversions, so I freely ordered some dishes and asked for a pitcher of wine.

Shortly after, the wine came. I tried it. While it was a local brew, called Rivermeet Vintage, it was much better than Chengzhou's Bamboo Leaf Green. Liu Tongyi tasted some of the lamb tripe and chicken gizzards in chili oil and said that the dish had an authentic flavor. The restaurants here were likely used to receiving customers from all over and were proficient in all sorts of cuisines.

The waiter brought over a lily bulb and water chestnut soup just then. I said, "Seeing water chestnuts always reminds me of a funny story. A couple of years ago when I was trading in the desert, I ate grilled meat every day and washed it down with sheep's milk and warm wine. My internal heat got so bad that my whole throat was sore. I could barely drink water. Suddenly I desperately wanted candied water chestnuts, ideally the kind chilled with cold water. I spent all night thinking about them, and then I actually ate some. The taste was still in my mouth the next morning. But when I got up, I found that the piece of fur I'd been using as a pillow had a big chunk nibbled out of the edge, as if a rat had been at it. When I thought about it, the candied water chestnuts I'd eaten in my dream had been a little strange. Chestnuts are tender and crisp, but mine were even chewier than jerky."

Smiling, Liu Tongyi said, "This dish certainly doesn't taste like jerky. Have some more."

I scooped up a spoonful and put it in the dish in front of me. "I didn't finish the story. When I left the desert and came south, the very first thing I did was go to the market to purchase a few jin of chestnuts and take them back to my lodgings to prepare them. But it turns out, water chestnuts have a skin that's very hard to get off, and they have to be boiled to make them sweet and tender. I borrowed a kitchen knife from the inn's cook, spent ages hacking away at the skins and nearly cut off a finger. When all the skin was cut away, there was almost nothing left of the

chestnut. So I went out and bought some more and peeled those as well. I practiced for days, peeling and slicing. Finally a waiter at the inn couldn't stand it anymore and asked me, since I wasn't planning to sell them and was only going to eat them myself, couldn't I just dip them in sugar and eat them? Why bother slicing them? So I found out what I'd been doing was superfluous."

Liu Tongyi looked at me dubiously. "Why not ask the inn to prepare them for you?"

Smiling, I said, "It's clear you aren't used to being out on business alone, or else you aren't as stubborn about food as I am. Your business is on a larger scale than mine, so in this aspect, you aren't as savvy. You can't always have a cook around. If you learn to make something yourself, as long as you can get together the ingredients, you can eat it whenever you want."

Liu Tongyi's expression became one of approval and admiration. I said modestly, "Though up to the present, I've only learned to make a few dishes and soups, which are just barely edible."

Liu Tongyi smiled and said, "Then I also want to go to the kitchen to learn a little. At least I want to learn to make chili sauce and chili oil, so I don't have to do without."

"I don't know what ingredients you have aboard ship," I said. "I'll see if I can scare up a few dishes to show off my meager skills, just by way of thanks."

"This meal is thanks enough," said Liu Tongyi. "Anyway, it doesn't cost me anything to have Master Zhao aboard."

His tone was still relaxed, just the same as when he had taken me away from Chengzhou.

We finished the meal and left the restaurant. Naturally, I couldn't go with Liu Tongyi to the two other kinds of establishments in town. It was already late, so we simply returned to the ship.

When I finished my bath, I left my cabin for a stroll and saw that the door to Liu Tongyi's cabin next to mine wasn't fully closed, and a light was still burning, so I went over, knocked, and opened it. "I wonder if I might get a cup of tea."

Smiling, Liu Tongyi said, "I've just made some, as it happens." He found a cup and filled it. It was weak tea.

He and I sat on either side of a table. Liu Tongyi said, "Since we left Chengzhou, I haven't yet asked where Master Zhao wants to go, and what plans you have for the future."

"When you drop me off in Suzhou," I said, "I'll continue southeast to the sea."

"Are you planning a sea voyage?" said Liu Tongyi.

"I'm planning to find a place where I can settle down. I won't be coming back."

Liu Tongyi was silent. I sighed and said, "This wasn't an easy decision to make, but it's no longer up to me. A dead man should take care not to show himself. The empire seems large, but in reality, it's very small. I've been all over these past few years, and I've still run into some people I used to know. So I'm going to find a place where such problems won't arise, and everyone can relax."

In Chengzhou, Yun Yu's emotional knot about me ought to have been untied. He and Qizhe could only rely on themselves going forward. There was no room for outside interference. I could finally be at peace.

Qitan also seemed quite well, and I had heard nothing of the princess or Chu Xun; they were probably also doing fine.

"In the end, I still can't say I've returned the favor I owe you," I said. "It wasn't very fair to deliberately give you a fright in prison like that, and now I've also asked you to transport me."

"I think that… you don't owe me any favors," said Liu Tongyi. "What's more, Master Zhao has presented me with an excellent deal."

"Then let's say this," I said. "If Master Mei one day goes to sea to purchase stock and passes by where I'm staying, I'll take care of food and lodgings for you."

Liu Tongyi paused. Smiling in the lamplight, he said, "I trust Master Zhao not to go back on that promise."

Looking at Liu Tongyi, I suddenly felt moved. Three years ago and now, when it came to the very end, it was always Liu Tongyi of all my acquaintances who was with me. Even if I had always been the one to deliberately seek him out, it was still a kind of destiny.

I returned to my cabin. The dark of midnight was a little desolate. In the silence, there came the splash of oars moving through the water. Next, I heard a couple of gentle raps at the cabin's window. A mincing female voice, slurring a little, said, "Sir, are you lonely tonight? Shall I keep you company?"

I was stunned. I thought to myself that she ought to change her method of soliciting customers. I was more likely to be scared than seduced.

I heard a few more knocks at the window. When no one answered, the splashing came again and moved away. Next, I heard crisp knocking on the window lattice of the neighboring ship. "Sir, are you lonely tonight? Shall I keep you company?"

Next, a window sash opened noisily, and a low voice said, "How would you keep me company, lovely?"

I was shaken. The mincing female voice said, “However you like, sir. My company doesn’t cost much.”

Laughing, the voice said, “How can a lovely lady be cheap?”

I opened the window a crack and saw the big ship moored next to us brightly lit. A man leaned against a window frame. His silhouette seemed familiar.

The reason that man looked familiar was that he bore a strong resemblance to Yun Yu. But it took only one glance for me to know this wasn’t Yun Yu, only someone who looked like him. Even the posture he was sitting in and the tone he was using to speak to that woman had something of Yun Yu in them, but it was the Yun Yu of three years ago, not the Yun Yu of today.

His voice was different from Yun Yu’s too, but it did resemble Yun Yu’s father, Yun Tang.

But Yun Tang was in his fifties now. Even if he had escaped his little temple, he wouldn’t be out here behaving like a suave young rake.

The similarity was so striking. Was he related to the Yun family?

I simply opened the window. On the deck of the ship next to us, some servants holding lanterns were helping a woman aboard. She straightened her dress and followed the servants into the ship’s hold. The boat that had brought her unexpectedly rowed back in my direction. The boatman bowed and said, “Sorry, sir, you didn’t answer, so I thought you didn’t want company. There are other women on shore, shall I bring you one?”

“Forget it, I think it’s not my fate tonight,” I said.

The boatman said at once, “Sure it is, there’s plenty of fate to go around. The ladies on shore are all hoping it’s their fate to be with you.”

Very persistent.

As I was about to respond, the man sitting by the window raised his voice. “My friend on the neighboring ship, the night is quiet, and I have wine and a lovely lady. Why not come over and drink with me?”

I was a little moved, but still I said, “Thank you for the invitation, but staying up late is bad for me, and I must turn in early so I can travel tomorrow.”

He laughed. “Then I won’t insist.” He saluted me from a distance, and I lifted my hands to return the salute. Only, I was in the dark with no lamp burning, so he must not have seen.

After a while, the window sash on the neighboring ship closed. I gave another tactful refusal to the boatman standing under the window waiting attentively and

also closed my window and went to sleep.

The next morning, when I had finished washing up, I wanted to go ask Liu Tongyi whether he knew the background of the man on the neighboring ship, but I heard from a page that the traveling merchants from the surrounding ships had come to call, and Liu Tongyi was talking to them now.

I came to the cabin used as a hall and, sure enough, found Liu Tongyi sitting with a number of men. They stood when they saw me arrive, and we exchanged greetings. One of them seemed to be the man in the cabin on the neighboring ship last night. Liu Tongyi said, "This Master Wan is a major merchant in the jewel trade."

I said at once that it was nice to meet him, and he smiled and said, "Master Mei is too kind. My name is Wan Qianshan, a mere seller of rocks."

The other traveling merchants around us laughed. "With Master Wan so modest, the rest of us won't even dare to claim to be in business."

I lifted my sleeves and said, "I am Zhao Cai, just a wanderer who makes my living picking up odds and ends. I am currently traveling on Master Mei's ship on my way to purchase wares in the south."

The merchants around us laughed again. "Master Zhao is being even more modest. You see, Master Wan really did go too far just now."

Seen by daylight, Wan Qianshan didn't look as similar to Yun Yu as he had in the dark last night. He seemed to be a few years older, close to thirty, and Yun Yu now was much sparer than him. This man was an excellent conversationalist and had an unbridled air about him. There must be something interesting in his background; he was no ordinary merchant. His face was faintly like Yun Yu's, but at a closer look, the details were very different. This man's eyes had an inborn smile that gave one an automatic feeling of ease and closeness. Only in the magnificence of his attire was there further resemblance to Yun Yu.

It occurred to me that examining Wan Qianshan so closely might make him suspicious, so I looked him over again and said, "I find that it is Master Wan who invited me to drink with him last night."

Realization appeared on Wan Qianshan's face. "So Master Zhao was the gentleman who refused to answer that lovely lady's knocking last night." He waved the fan in his hand. "It was precisely because I wanted to meet the man from last night that I came over this morning."

All the traveling merchants sat there awhile, exchanging goodwill, then bade farewell and left one after another.

Not long after, the ship left Rivermeet's pier and continued on its way. Liu Tongyi and I at last had time to spare for breakfast.

The cook on Liu Tongyi's ship was most impressive. The porridge, the side dishes, and two plates of steamed dumplings were all exquisite.

I said to Liu Tongyi, "That Wan Qianshan just now, who did he look like to you?"

"At first glance, he looks a lot like Vice-Minister Yun," said Liu Tongyi.

"That's right," I said. "And when I heard his voice last night, I thought he sounded something like Yun Tang." I told him what had happened last night. "But when I took a closer look, the resemblance wasn't as strong. I was wondering whether he could be a relative."

Liu Tongyi calmly finished eating a dumpling, then said, "Maybe. I seem to recall that Vice-Minister Yun has an older brother."

I paused. "You mean Yun Zai?"

Yun Yu was the third of Yun Tang's children, with one older brother and one older sister. All three of them were the children of Yun Tang's first wife. This Madam Yun was of low birth, the beloved daughter of some merchant. Before Yun Tang made his name in the imperial examinations, his family was impoverished, and he married this lady in order to support himself. Yun Yu's grandmother was very fussy; when Yun Tang gained fame through scholarly honors, she began to find her daughter-in-law dissatisfying. She simply wasn't well-bred enough and lacked the manner of an official's wife. She would embarrass Yun Tang. She couldn't help often regretting that marriage; if she had known her son would attain scholarly honors so young, she wouldn't have approved it. Naturally, Madam Yun felt unhappy listening to this all the time. Yun Tang had made a name for himself very young; there was no shortage of beautiful ladies to run to his embrace. He wedded several concubines, each one beautiful and talented. Madam Yun was melancholy. She died in labor while giving birth to Yun Yu's younger brother, and the child also did not make it. Apparently, Yun Tang was celebrating one of his concubines' birthdays at the time. Yun Yu and his sister were still very young, but Yun Zai, the eldest, was old enough to see the situation for what it was. He bitterly resented his grandmother and Yun Tang. At thirteen or fourteen, he abandoned his studies and left home. He claimed he would have nothing more to do with the Yun family. He hadn't been heard from since.

He would be about the same age as Wan Qianshan. If Yun Zai had run away to his maternal grandparents then, he might very well be in business now. Only, I didn't think Yun Tang's wife's surname had been Wan. Perhaps he had changed it to conceal his identity.

Liu Tongyi said, "I just heard Wan Qianshan say that he is going to Yangzhou on business. He'll be traveling the same route as us much of the way. If you wish to investigate, there will be plenty of opportunities."

"Investigating won't be any use," I said. "Even if he is Yun Zai, first, he won't stage a rebellion; second, he won't avenge Yun Tang; and third, it's the Yun family's private affair. I was only a little curious because the resemblance was so strong when I saw him last night."

Liu Tongyi smiled and said nothing else.

When I went up on deck to stand and get some air, I did see Wan Qianshan's ship swaying not far from us. I wasn't planning to investigate further, but that evening, when we once again tied up at the same pier for the night, Wan Qianshan came over of his own accord and arranged to eat with us.

Wan Qianshan was always traveling the waterways, making shipments. He was familiar with piers in towns everywhere. He arranged a banquet on his own ship, but a cook came from shore to prepare the meal. The lanterns burned as brightly as midday, the table was laden with dishes, and beautiful women with their breasts half bared played and sang and poured wine. I hadn't witnessed this kind of production in three years; the sight of those women made me a little dizzy. Liu Tongyi, meanwhile, was absolutely unperturbed. Two women pressed up against him and touched him till the corner of my mouth was spasming, and he still went on drinking wine with an unaltered expression.

Wan Qianshan said, "In a little while, I'd like to take you two to a nice place so you can enjoy it with me."

I steadfastly declined. I couldn't even enjoy what was in front of my eyes; I didn't think I could stand a nice place.

His eyes narrowed in a smile, Wan Qianshan said, "Why not first hear about its features?" He drew closer to Liu Tongyi and me, and whispered mysteriously, "Some beauties from Dongying have just arrived at a bathhouse in town. Their massage technique is very unique. Wouldn't it be a pity to miss out?"

When he mentioned Dongying beauties, I was a little intrigued. I had always heard that women from Dongying were naturally obedient and would do anything a

man asked, with a meekness that had an entirely different appeal from women of the midlands.

Once, my imperial nephews had been talking of finding a few to play with. Qili rubbed his hands together and said that when he sent people over there, he would instruct them to find a few pretty Dongying boys as well to give me a taste of something fresh. Unfortunately, the court's honest officials were remonstrating at the time, saying that wastefulness and extravagance must be curbed. The emperor's edict was issued, and the Dongying girls and boys all melted into thin air. This was a matter of some regret.

I hadn't expected an opportunity to make up for those regrets today.

"Let me play host," said Wan Qianshan. "Think of it as an opportunity to expand your horizons, how about that?"

"How could we let you do that? Master Mei and I have already eaten Wan-xiong's banquet. No matter what, when we go into town, it's my turn to treat you."

Wan Qianshan clapped. "That's as good as agreeing to go, Zhao-xiong. You've said it's your treat, you can't go back on your word now."

I agreed at once. When the words were out of my mouth, I realized that I had been in too much of a rush to agree. Liu Tongyi probably wouldn't go to a place like that.

As I thought this, Liu Tongyi was already saying with a smile, "Then I will come and benefit from the offer along with Wan-xiong."

I was a little surprised that he was going. I knew very well that he had spent many years at court and had worked in trade for years; he must have seen his share of brothels. But somehow he did not seem to belong in those places.

The bathhouse Wan Qianshan had mentioned was called the Garden of Fragrance. It was in the main street of Dongping City on the shore. Wan Qianshan only ordered two servants to come with us. We went ashore and walked for a short time, then reached the gate.

Dongping's shopping district was similar to Rivermeet's, but because the city was larger, the main street was more prosperous. The town had a number of other bathhouses alongside the Garden of Fragrance, though none as magnificent. When we entered, an attendant came toward us with two foreign girls, who twisted their hips and wore garments that left their abdomens bare. The attendant's manner was very gracious. He proffered a booklet containing drawings of the bathhouse's various rooms for us to choose from.

According to the drawings, the great hall in the bathhouse featured a big bathing pool in the center, called the Pool of Fragrance, in which many ordinary customers could bathe together. Small rooms with private pools were divided into two areas. One was called Taste of Tranquility, which contained a Hangzhou Chamber, a Suzhou Chamber, a Capital Chamber, and so on, all domestic place names. The other area was called Experience of Serendipity, containing a Persia Chamber, a Goryeo Chamber, a Java Chamber, and so on. They were all in foreign styles; there was even a Nahe Chamber.

The attendant pointed to an innermost corner and said, "This is our new Dongying Chamber. The pool is also the newest. There's just one room with a first-class pool left. It's perfect."

"How many bathing pools in a single room?" I asked.

"Only one," said the attendant. "But don't worry, sir, even with three more of you, it wouldn't be cramped."

The first-class Dongying Chamber was tastefully appointed, divided into an inner room and an outer room. The outer room was supplied with a table, chairs, mats, and couches. There was fruit and tea on the table and slender bamboo summer mats laid out on the couches. Though the calligraphy and paintings on the walls were not the works of famous masters, they still gave the room some elegance. Five girls knelt by the door. They flattened themselves in greeting. Liu Tongyi and I both told them to rise, but the girls remained kneeling. The attendant said, "They are genuine Dongying young ladies. They kneel like this while serving guests. You gentlemen will get used to it."

"Will they be able to reach to help us undress?" said Wan Qianshan.

The attendant quickly said, "Of course they'll stand up when they need to."

We just had to go through the experience step by step. First, we dismissed the attendant. The floor was of long wooden planks and extremely clean. When the three of us went inside, a girl followed us on her knees with a cloth, wiping the floor. Her clothing was different from the four other girls. She seemed to be here especially to perform this role.

Wan Qianshan sat on a couch, and a girl came up in front of him on her knees to remove his shoes. Liu Tongyi and I also each had a girl attending us. When it came time to remove our clothes, the kneeling girls did indeed stand. They kept their heads meekly bowed all the while, and their technique was unusually gentle. Snow white necks emerged from their collars. They had a great deal of foreign charm.

I was appreciating the beauty a little, but from the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of another girl helping Liu Tongyi remove his outer robe. The lapels of his undergown were half open. In the steam rising from the pool in the inner room, he did not look very much like the usual Liu Tongyi.

Steam billowed in the inner room. The hot water in the pool was clear enough to see the bottom. Soaking in it was very comfortable. The three girls knelt by the pool to serve us. The massage was a little weak, but there was a kind of intimacy to it.

Wan Qianshan was evidently a regular visitor. He leaned back at the poolside, letting the girl behind him massage his neck and shoulders as he chatted to Liu Tongyi and me. Liu Tongyi was next to him, not far away, speaking little as usual, leaning back against the edge of the pool in a slightly indolent posture. Once, I had longed to the point of dreaming about it to have a glimpse of Chancellor Liu unclothed. Now that my long-cherished wish had been fulfilled, it gave me a strange, complicated feeling.

Some time later, the fourth girl knelt by the pool holding a tray. On the tray was a silver pitcher and wine cups. Wan Qianshan drank a cup of wine from the hand of the girl attending him. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her down. There was a splash. The girl fell into his arms and meekly took the initiative to raise her head. Wan Qianshan pulled open her dress in the water. Soon they were entangled.

The girl next to me slipped into the water. The scent of wine drifted from her delicate lips. I tasted the wine in her mouth. It was sweet and fragrant, but lacked the rich intoxication of liquor; it was a little like sugar water. I pushed her away slightly and saw the girl attending Liu Tongyi climb atop him. Their lips met.

I stood, left the pool, and went to the outer room. The girl attending me followed. Seeing me put on my inner robe and sit on a couch, she knelt beside the couch and looked up at me. She looked a little frightened.

I waved at her. “Go in and attend to those two gentlemen. I’m going to rest here.”

She obediently left at once. She had actually understood me. I thought that perhaps these girls didn’t come from Dongying. They might be local to Dongping City itself.

I didn’t know when Wan Qianshan and Liu Tongyi would be out. I lay down on the couch and took a nap.

In my dreams, I returned to the capital. In a private room at a restaurant, Chu Xun filled my cup with wine. The man across from me pulled the beautiful prostitute beside him into his embrace, raised a jade cup, and said to me with a

smile, "Does Your Highness find this wine acceptable?"

I heard myself say, "When Supervisor Yun has gone to the rare trouble of warming Huadiao himself, who could say it wasn't good?"

When we left the Garden of Fragrance, Wan Qianshan sighed in profound dissatisfaction. "Zhao-xiong and Mei-xiong have awfully high standards. Those girls were already better than average, and one of you left after just a touch, while the other only briefly went through the motions. I didn't see any point in staying after that. Oh, well."

I cupped my hands and apologized. "For some reason, I wasn't in the mood today. I said I wanted to play the host, but instead I spoiled Wan-xiong's good time. I'm so sorry."

Liu Tongyi's expression had been a little odd for a while. He seemed thoughtful. Now he frowned and said, "The behavior of those Dongying girls at the bathhouse was highly suspect."

"Of course it was suspect," I said. "How could girls just brought over from Dongying understand our language? They must be local girls from Dongping."

Liu Tongyi shook his head. "That's not what I mean. They kept kneeling on the ground and seemed extremely interested in what was under our clothing. After that, in the pool, they were very proactive. They seemed to want something."

Wan Qianshan and I looked at him simultaneously and coughed.

"*Ahem*… Ran… Master Mei, naturally those girls wanted something… They wanted… *ahem*…"

Wan Qianshan put in, "That's right… *ahem*… it was their approval of myself and you two gentlemen that made them want something… haha."

Liu Tongyi looked at me seriously. "You really didn't realize that those girls were deliberately inspecting our bodies? I thought you left early because you'd noticed."

He wasn't speaking very loudly. I looked around automatically. It was all right, nobody seemed to have heard.

Wan Qianshan laughed heartily. "Mei-xiong is a remarkable man. You're right, but sadly we didn't satisfy them. Those girls must be very disappointed!"

Liu Tongyi frowned. "That is not what I'm talking about. Those girls actually seemed to be…"

Before he could finish, I stopped in my tracks.

In front of us, a person strolled slowly out of an alley and stood ten paces up ahead.

The lamps were dazzling, the street was bustling. He put his hands behind his back and looked our way.

"Uncle, were the Dongying girls to your liking?"

Chapter Ten

At the angle of the passage in the ship's hold, Liu Tongyi quietly asked me, "What should we serve him?"

I glanced at a door that stood ajar. "Just avoid any foods he doesn't eat. You ought to know what those are."

Liu Tongyi smiled bitterly. "How would I know? That is why I'm asking you, Master Zhao."

"You must have attended many banquets, Ransi," I whispered, "and probably received plenty of imperial visitations at home."

The Liu family had produced generations of senior ministers, all honest officials burning with loyalty. Liu Tongyi had worked closely with Qizhe to deal with the conspiracy I had headed. Though his relationship with him was nowhere near as close as Yun Yu's, he still ought to know something of Qizhe's preferences and temperament.

"To tell you the truth," said Liu Tongyi, "my family did enjoy imperial grace in the past, so I know something of the late emperor's preferences. But this present one is different from the previous generation. I never had the pleasure of receiving him at home, and when I was occasionally invited to attend banquets at the palace, it was hard to pick up any likes and dislikes."

I had once regularly heard it remarked in private that Qizhe surpassed the late emperor in every aspect, except that his tastes weren't as simple. I agreed with this. The fault lay with the empress dowager, a very fussy woman who had overly coddled her son, letting him grow up picky. When Qizhe came to visit Huai Manor as crown prince, everyone treated it like the impending invasion of an enemy army, not daring to slack off. Seating, food, utensils—there could be no mistake in any of it. Later we had arranged the room separated from the main hall by a side hall for the crown prince's particular use.

When it came to foods Qizhe avoided, the number was unusually large. I recalled that Huai Manor used to have a notebook with a dense record of everything he wouldn't touch. I'd heard that when he grew up, to better suit the demeanor of a wise ruler, he had changed a great deal, so I didn't know what foods he avoided

now. I could only give Liu Tongyi a vague idea: "Scallions, ginger, garlic, and such should be put in when they're necessary during cooking, but when the dish is ready, the scallion stalks and ginger slices have to be picked out. For fish, only use the two flaps of meat behind the gills and the meat from the flanks, absolutely no bones. Milder flavors, best if there's nothing spicy. It's late, so nothing sweet…"

Liu Tongyi noted everything down and went to the kitchen himself to deliver instructions.

I turned back and entered that half-open door. Qizhe was talking to Wan Qianshan.

Wan Qianshan was just saying, "…The cloth trade is a profitable one, but there are too many connections you have to make at every level, so I thought it over and chose to trade in stones. The sort of wide-ranging business you and your uncle do takes a very open mind."

"I don't have much contact with business," said Qizhe. "It's all my uncle's doing."

"A young man with your qualities is sure to surpass his elder a year or two after taking up the work," said Wan Qianshan. He turned his head and smiled at me. "I hope you won't take offense to me saying so, Master Zhao."

"Of course not," I said, "Master Wan flatters me."

I had thought that Wan Qianshan and the likely counterfeit Dongying girls were all Qizhe's spies, but from the contents of this conversation, that didn't seem to be the case. If Wan Qianshan were a spy, Qizhe certainly wouldn't be playacting with him here.

I entered the room and said, "The kitchen is preparing supper. It will be ready soon."

Wan Qianshan rose tactfully. "Well, it's late, I'll take my leave. We'll be traveling together for a time. I'll come visit again when we go ashore another day."

I politely asked him to stay for supper. After a few exchanges, I saw Wan Qianshan out.

When I returned to the room, Qizhe was standing at the table with his hands behind his back. When he had suddenly appeared in the street, I had been taken completely by surprise. All I could think of was to escort his imperial person to Liu Tongyi's ship. This was my first chance to speak openly.

Just then, Liu Tongyi came in with tea. I shut the door. Liu Tongyi put down the tea and performed a full ceremonial obeisance. I also knelt.

"Leave it," said Qizhe. "This is no place for it. Rise, Official Liu and Imperial Uncle." He slowly strolled toward us. "Zhang Ping's guess was correct, as expected.

Imperial Uncle faked his death. Official Liu, Zhang Ping was seen visiting your home late at night after Imperial Uncle's faked death. Imperial Uncle had your assistance in carrying out his plot."

Liu Tongyi knelt again and calmly said, "I have committed treason and ought to be punished with death."

"Your Majesty," I said at once, "when I faked my death, I deliberately put on a show in front of Chancellor Liu to fool him. Everything that happened after, I did alone. It really had absolutely nothing to do with Chancellor Liu."

Qizhe laughed. "Official Liu, that house in Qincai Alley in Suzhou is yours, is it not?"

Qincai Alley? That was the place where I had briefly stayed right after escaping the capital. I slowly turned toward Liu Tongyi.

When I woke up after faking my death, I found myself in a secluded little house, with no one around but Zhang Xiao and his teacher. I hadn't taken the initiative to ask where we were and only learned later from their conversation that I was in Suzhou, and the lane where the little house was situated was called Qincai Alley.

The house didn't belong to Zhang Xiao's teacher? How could it be Liu Tongyi's?

I was still struggling in the dark when Qizhe said, "Official Liu, though you have committed treason, it was by this means that Imperial Uncle avoided dying in a miscarriage of justice. At last there is a way for us to remedy our great error. Balancing merit against fault, you have made a great contribution." He took another two steps forward and stooped to raise Liu Tongyi to his feet.

"Ransi, we have not known peace day or night during these years without you at our side. Return to court with us."

Liu Tongyi bowed and said, "Your Majesty, I have…"

Qizhe gripped his arm. "Ransi, how can there be such distance between us? When you insisted on leaving, you must have known that it was very much against our own will that we let you go."

Watching the scene before me, in spite of myself, I felt a little enfeebled. Reasonably speaking, I wasn't old enough for my eyes to be betraying me.

Qizhe held Liu Tongyi by the arm, looking intently into his eyes.

"In recent years, we have produced a number of children, while you remain unmarried. We… have honored the promise we made to you three years ago. Only, Chu Xun insisted on becoming a monk, and we arranged for him to chant scriptures at Pufang Temple. Ransi, it has been three years. Isn't it time you returned to our side?"

“This is my first time receiving such profound favor from Your Majesty,” said Liu Tongyi. “I am infinitely distressed. I know not what to do.”

Qizhe frowned. “Ransi, were we not sufficiently good to you in the past?”

Liu Tongyi said, “Generations of the Liu family have enjoyed imperial benevolence, and Your Majesty has always treated me with particular kindness. But I am slow and mediocre, unsuited to serve as an official. A vigorous and decisive man like Lord Zhang is better able to assist Your Majesty and bring prosperity to the empire.”

These circumstances were rather remarkable.

I’d thought at first there had been something between Qizhe and Liu Tongyi, but from Liu Tongyi’s behavior, that did not seem to be the case.

When Liu Tongyi mentioned Zhang Ping, Qizhe’s expression stiffened. “We think that he does not bear comparison to you.”

“Lord Zhang’s conduct is in some ways unique,” said Liu Tongyi, “but he is honest and upright, a keen and able investigator, and a worthy pillar of the court.”

Qizhe looked green. “Leave it. We are well aware which man belongs in which position. Zhang Ping is best placed leading the Ministry of Justice or the Court of Judicial Review. As imperial chancellor, he suffers, and we suffer to see him.”

It seemed that Qitan had been telling the truth. Zhang Ping really had driven Qizhe up a wall over the past few years.

Qizhe looked at Liu Tongyi again. “Forget it. Whatever we say now, you will only give a diplomatic refusal. At any rate, we will rest here tonight. You can take your time and think about it.” Finally, he released Liu Tongyi’s arm.

Yet Liu Tongyi looked alarmed. He looked at me. I knew this was because Qizhe had said, “We will rest here tonight.”

But I couldn’t speak now. I could only look helplessly back at Liu Tongyi. In the end, it was Liu Tongyi who asked, “Your Majesty, may I make so bold as to inquire, where are your guards?”

“Oh,” said Qizhe, “we did not want them to spoil the mood for our chat with Ransi…” He glanced darkly at me. “And Imperial Uncle. Deng Tan is in the neighborhood with them.”

Liu Tongyi’s expression relaxed a bit.

Deng Tan had been a deputy captain in the emperor’s personal guard. He must have been promoted in the past couple of years. He was steady and taciturn, a dependable man.

Liu Tongyi bowed and said, “Supper will be brought shortly. I will go have a cabin prepared.”

Qizhe walked over to the bed and stroked the bed curtains. “Ransi’s ship is so elegant. There is no need to go to much trouble. This room looks good to us.”

Liu Tongyi looked again at me, because this cabin was mine.

Qizhe turned beside the bed and looked around. “It seems someone has been staying here.”

“Your Majesty,” I had to say, “this is my cabin. It is unsuited for hosting Your Majesty. Let… Master Liu arrange another room.”

Qizhe sat on the edge of the bed. “We are staying in this room.”

Liu Tongyi was about to try again. I gave a covert tug on his sleeve and said, “Then please take some tea and rest, Your Majesty. Allow Master Liu and myself to withdraw for the moment.”

Qizhe made a noise of assent.

Liu Tongyi left the cabin with me. In a quiet corner, he whispered, “There aren’t any attendants in that room. What do I do?”

“That is precisely what we came out here to take care of,” I said. “Order someone to go up on deck and shout, ‘Are Young Master Zhao’s attendants here?’ Someone will show up. Have them taken to the room to attend him.”

Liu Tongyi nodded and hurried off to do it. Soon enough, a sailor brought someone over, a man around fifty years old, wearing the short robe of an ordinary servant, with a perfectly smooth upper lip. When he saw Liu Tongyi and me, he lowered his head and bowed.

This man was Wang You, a palace eunuch who had always attended Qizhe, and who had also served my father in his youth. He had often come to visit Huai Manor. When I saw him, I felt unwontedly moved.

We couldn’t speak out here. Liu Tongyi and I went to his room. When the door was closed, I quietly said to him, “Now send someone with Wang You to change the bedding and small items for ordinary use.”

Liu Tongyi took note of this and asked if there was anything else he needed to do.

“Nothing else,” I said. I gestured in the direction of the cabin. “He’s been like this since he was little. He won’t stay in a fresh room out of caution. The empress dowager spoiled him.”

The empress dowager had instructed that each time he came to Huai Manor, anything Qizhe might use must be brought from the palace, and she wouldn’t let

him sit in a room that had been specially prepared; she insisted that only a room in regular use would do, as if she were afraid that a freshly arranged room would have some mechanism for assassination. Later, when she came to believe that my mother and I weren't so stupid that we would assassinate the crown prince at Huai Manor, she finally allowed a room to be set aside for Qizhe to rest in, and even that had once been my usual retiring room.

Liu Tongyi smiled. It looked to me like a different smile from his usual one, so I couldn't help asking, "What is it?"

"Nothing," said Liu Tongyi, "just that I used to hear the empress dowager complain at court that His Majesty had some bad habits that he'd picked up by going to Huai Manor so often and being spoiled by Prince Huai."

The empress dowager had said that? This was slander. When the crown prince or the emperor came to visit, wouldn't it have been a greater offense not to treat him well?

Smiling, Liu Tongyi said, "Though when it comes to calling a person by his courtesy name out of nowhere, His Majesty and Prince Huai really are somewhat alike."

I was surprised. I looked at Liu Tongyi and blurted out, "Ransi…"

"I'm going to send someone to change the bedding," said Liu Tongyi. He turned and left.

I watched him leave. Some things were weighing on my mind, but this wasn't the time to ask.

Qizhe ate a little supper. He didn't say it was bad, which meant it was all right.

By the time he had been assisted in washing up, it was already nearly daybreak. Qizhe was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, as if he had no intention of going to sleep. Fortunately, Wang You was there to persuade him, and he finally went to bed to get some rest.

After he fell asleep, Wang You quietly came to the new cabin Liu Tongyi had arranged for me. He conveyed His Majesty's verbal edict, an order for me to enter the imperial presence after I had breakfast.

That evening, I strolled to the fore of the ship and stood there. The river was wide. Ruddy clouds filled half the sky.

Liu Tongyi came to stand beside me. "In another shichen, we'll reach the pier where we're stopping for the night."

There was no one around. I turned my head to look at him. "Ransi."

Liu Tongyi looked at me.

"I call you that because what I want to ask isn't addressed to Master Mei, but it isn't very appropriate to address you by your former title, and just using your full name might be considered rude. I hope… I hope you don't mind, Ransi."

Liu Tongyi froze. Then, smiling, he said, "It seems Master Zhao took my joke to heart last night. A form of address is nothing more than that. There's no need to worry about it. Please speak openly."

Something was different about him in the sunset glow. I remembered that, once, I had poured out my feelings to him by the light of sunset. This was a memory so old it was nearly buried in the earth.

"I said I have something to ask, but that isn't very apt. I've been considering it for a while, and I don't know what to say. About Qincai Alley… I don't know what happened, and I don't know how you helped me, nor why you wanted to help me. In short, thank you."

I didn't say the words "thank you" very weightily, but they were the weightiest words I had spoken in my life.

Liu Tongyi's expression stilled. After a while, he said, "There are some things it would perhaps be better to speak of openly and in their entirety. I wonder what His Majesty spoke of when he bade Your Highness Prince Huai enter his presence today. Would Your Highness permit me to speak of what happened in the past from the beginning?"

I sighed and said, "Ransi has never been willing to call me Chengjun. Prince Huai is dead. Go ahead, what would it hurt?"

Liu Tongyi froze. I found that this expression of slight confusion made him look better than usual, more domestic.

Finally, with an indescribable expression, Liu Tongyi mumbled, "Chengjun."

I laughed in spite of myself. The atmosphere relaxed.

But then Liu Tongyi schooled his expression into solemnity and said to me, "This is not a good place to talk. Can we go to my room?"

Of course I agreed. I went with Liu Tongyi to his room. He closed the door and made tea. In a mild voice, he quietly recounted to me, "Since I was young, I often heard my grandfather say that Huai Manor's power and influence were overwhelming, and disaster was sure to come from that quarter one day. If any member of our family had the good fortune to be appointed to office, we had to undertake to curb Prince Huai's power. Later, I received scholarly honors and

entered the court, and one day, I received an invitation to attend a banquet with Lord Li Yue and a number of other honest officials of the court. At that banquet, I learned that as a precaution against Prince Huai, they had already planted a spy beside him. My position wasn't high then. I did not participate. It was years later that a credible secret report claimed that Yun Tang and Wang Qin were planning a rebellion. Lord Li Yue was dead by then, and the others had been pushed out and transferred elsewhere. I was already at the Court of Judicial Review and received His Majesty's summons to confer with His Highness Prince An and a number of other important ministers. I said to His Majesty that, while Yun Tang and Wang Qin had great influence, they had little military force at their disposal. What had given them the boldness to rebel? Was there something we were unaware of? And it was I who said that the greatest suspicion lay with Huai Manor."

His face was a little pale. He went on speaking.

"When Prince An and the other ministers had withdrawn, His Majesty kept me back alone. He asked whether I had any other views. I could tell that His Majesty did not want to suspect Prince Huai. In the interests of caution, I said to His Majesty that I would not speculate in the absence of evidence. But His Majesty said that he was already certain. Then he had me meet someone. That person was Yun Yu."

I continued listening in silence.

"It was then that I learned that Lord Yun's political opinions differed from his father's. Only His Majesty and I knew of this. His Majesty already had evidence against Yun Tang and Wang Qin. It was only Huai Manor's power that had yet to be sufficiently plumbed. Lord Li Yue had used his own daughter to spy on Prince Huai, but after years of probing, there was still no concrete evidence. Therefore, I said to His Majesty that I had always heard Prince Huai was not interested in women, and wouldn't it be more suitable to investigate along another line. I recall that when I said this, Lord Yun laughed and said, 'That is a brutal tactic.' Then he said to His Majesty, 'It seems we can depend on Lord Liu to become a pillar of the court.' Some time later, I became imperial chancellor. Still later… Chu Xun…"

I frowned. "I remember you saying that you didn't send Chu Xun to me."

With a mocking smile, Liu Tongyi said, "But I may as well have. Chu Xun used to be a laborer at the examination center. He couldn't stand up to the beatings and humiliation, so he tried to drown himself, but I happened to run into him. I often gave him books to read, and I was the one who taught him to play the zither. He was intelligent and well-mannered. Later, his sister redeemed his bond and brought

him to her brothel to be a musician, and he said to me that, as I was an official of the court, it wouldn't be good for people to learn that we were friends, so he wouldn't come see me again. Still later, I learned that he was close to Your Highness. I went to see him, and I was spotted by Lord Yun…"

And that was why Yun Yu had gone out of his way to make Liu Tongyi and Chu Xun perform a duet.

Liu Tongyi continued, "Chu Xun collected a heap of evidence against Prince Huai for me. Lord Yun once said something incisive about me—that I'm always sanctimoniously directing others, but I don't even have the guts to risk myself."

I was astonished. "Do you mean that assassination attempt was something you and Yun Yu arranged, so you would risk yourself in order to help Yun Yu gain my confidence?"

Liu Tongyi went on, "Later still, Prince Huai was arrested. I had not arranged a spy. I let Lord Yun do that, and Lord Yun arranged to be the spy himself and at last captured Prince Huai during the rebellion. I only made my appearance when it came time for the interrogation… Your Highness Prince Huai admitted everything, confessed everything, but I realized that something was wrong. Apart from the evidence Lord Yun and Prince An were aware of, there was still absolutely no other evidence of your guilt. This was not the way a rebel ought to have left things. Moreover, Your Highness Prince Huai confessed too much."

Liu Tongyi finally looked at me. His gaze was empty. "When Your Highness Prince Huai said you wanted to see me, I thought that there would be some clues, but instead Your Highness committed suicide right before my eyes…"

The nails of his right hand turned white as he gripped his teacup, but he pulled his lips into a faint smile. "So… regardless of anything I might have done in the matter of Qincai Alley… Your Highness Prince Huai still need say nothing to me. If Your Highness really had died then, even if I had killed myself, I wouldn't have had the gall to go to the underworld."

Liu Tongyi put a hand to his forehead.

"I hadn't yet told Your Highness Prince Huai of these things because I wished to avoid having to reveal the truth behind the whole sequence of events. Perhaps Your Highness will think that I've been putting on an act around you, but in reality, I just didn't know what to do. In this whole business, I have played the most sordid role."

I couldn't help myself. "Ransi, you…"

Liu Tongyi continued, "Perhaps people like this often appear in my family. Always boasting of our loyalty, but more despicable than the so-called schemers.

Your Highness may not be aware that an ancestor of mine once replaced a youthful emperor with his own twin brother. The true emperor hanged himself in the very cell where Your Highness was held. Then my grandfather, during his time as imperial chancellor, constantly made trouble for the late Prince Huai. And then there's me. I was no loyal minister, and neither was I an honest man. I didn't know what I amounted to. I could no longer remain at court. That is why I resigned my position and took to wandering, changed my name, and went into trade."

Liu Tongyi raised his cup. "A merchant is crafty and cares only for profit. I suppose this occupation suits my nature." He tipped back his head and downed the tea in his cup as though it were wine.

"And did Fang Haoran also become a merchant because merchants are crafty and care only for profit?" I said.

Liu Tongyi looked blank when I said this.

Fang Haoran was the main character of *The Legend of the Zither Hero of the Late Sui Dynasty.* He had been created by the Scholar of Wind and Rain, the author of the book. The Scholar of Wind and Rain's other works were mediocre, but Fang Haoran's tale stood out among them. In terms of fame among writers of romances, he didn't match up to Bai Ruyi or the Mad Drunkard, but Fang Haoran, along with Zhao Yu in the Scholar of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills's *The Divine White Jade Sword* and Tan Yizui in the Mad Drunkard's *Drunken Odyssey*, were together considered the three heroes of literature. I had greatly admired them as a child.

I said seriously to Liu Tongyi, "You're the same as me. We both went into trade in imitation of Fang Haoran. Even the names Zhao Cai and Mei Yong were copied in part from the aliases Fang Haoran uses. If you disparage yourself like this now, aren't you also bringing myself and Fang Haoran down with you?"

Liu Tongyi looked straight at me. He was much more adorable now than with his usual calm act.

"Master Mei—since it makes you uncomfortable when I call you by your courtesy name, then this is what I'll call you—I don't want to waste any more time talking around things. In your speech, apart from self-reflection and self-disparagement, there is another implication, which is that you don't want to return to court as an official."

Liu Tongyi's expression stilled again. I said, "Still another implication is that you want to tell me that I owe you no favor for saving me."

Everything he had said, apart from what concerned the assassination attempt, were things I had guessed at the time. I'd even had my suspicions on the subject of Chu Xun. He had put all of this together and told me about it because, after seeing the emperor, I would naturally have understood a few of the key steps in the sequence.

I gave a couple of bitter laughs and sighed in jest. "In the end, whether we're Prince Huai and Chancellor Liu or Trader Zhao and Master Mei, there will never come a day when I call you Ransi and you call me Chengjun."

Liu Tongyi's expression changed repeatedly. Finally, with a bitter laugh, he said, "Your Highness Prince Huai is as impressive as expected."

I went a step further to set him at his ease. "Prince Huai, Jing Weiyi, has been dead a long time. What happened is in the past. A minor merchant like myself has no place acting as spokesman for the court. Do not worry, Master Mei."

We were nearly at the pier where we would be staying the night. A leisurely evening breeze blew in through the half-propped window sash. I looked out at the river cloaked in dusk and recalled the lines Liu Tongyi had favored me with: *With his affections at Mount Wu engaged, what needs King Xiang in dreams to seek Jiangnan?*

The ship slowly pulled in. People were densely packed on shore, in another scene of prosperity. A fishing boat sailed past our ship. There was a big catch of crabs in the net in the fisherman's hands.

That was right. In another month, it would be the Mid-Autumn Festival. The crabs were beginning to grow fat.

Liu Tongyi stood. "Now that we're here, I'm going to His Majesty's room to pay my respects and make suitable arrangements."

On impulse, I abruptly asked Liu Tongyi, "Why don't you get married?"

Liu Tongyi froze. Then he smiled. "I'm used to being on my own."

"If there's no one on your mind, you should hurry up and find someone," I advised. "You won't feel it now, but once you get past thirty and find you have no one to eat mooncakes and New Year's Eve dinner with during the holidays, you'll feel the lack. A man like Master Mei is sure to be able to find a gentle, virtuous woman with both beauty and talent if he likes."

Smiling, Liu Tongyi said, "All right, I'll find one in the future." Facing the dusky light filtering in through the window, he looked at me and sighed. "Actually, I don't understand it. I meant to talk to Master Zhao about the past. How did we end up on this subject?"

"We've been over what happened three years ago again and again," I said. "What can come of bringing it up again? It's better to grab hold of the present." I put my hands behind my back and looked out the window. "Are you going to tell me you've never thought of a poem while watching the sunset?"

"At the moment, I am only thinking of how to arrange His Majesty's dinner tonight," Liu Tongyi said seriously.

The ship approached the shore. The emperor was not planning to make landfall here and return to the capital. He said that the scenery was pleasant on the river, and the local customs along the way were charmingly simple. He wanted to go for a stroll.

In spite of myself, I felt sympathy for Wang You, Deng Tan, and that crowd of guards.

The emperor ordered Liu Tongyi to accompany him on his walk. I remained aboard ship and ate a sumptuous dinner on my own. Next to us, Wan Qianshan's ship was once again fully illuminated. Waves of music and laughter escaped and came my way.

When the night watches began, the emperor returned, having eaten dinner on shore. Liu Tongyi gave me a quick greeting, then went to arrange the emperor's bath. He just had time to drink a little tea and get some rest before the emperor finished his bath and summoned him to his room to chat.

I strolled to the fore of the ship to catch the breeze. Beside us, Wan Qianshan's ship was bright and raucous.

Some boats were drifting quietly beside the ship. Deng Tan and the guards must have been on them.

The moon was bright and the stars were sparse. All was peaceful. I recalled one Mid-Autumn Festival, after my mother passed, the princess said she was going to her parents' house for the holiday. I allowed it. When it was nearly dark, I looked at the sky from the veranda thinking that I was the only one in this courtyard to eat and drink and enjoy the enormous round moon. I really felt unbearably lonely.

Suddenly, I was notified that Lord Yun had come. I watched as he was brought over by a servant. From a distance, he smiled and said to me, "Why is Your Highness Prince Huai standing here alone on the Mid-Autumn Festival?"

Perhaps it was then that I had the realization: everyone needs a companion.

I did want to have such a person by my side, he with no one in his heart but me, me with no one in my heart but him, steady and enduring, always together.

Sharing our meals, sleeping in the same bed, celebrating holidays together.

But finding this might be easy, or it might be hard. It was a matter of fate.

I returned to the ship's hold. Liu Tongyi was still entertaining the emperor. I went to my room to sleep. That night I had a dream.

In my dream, I was old, with a beard hanging down my chest, unable to straighten my back. Leaning on a cane, I stood in the courtyard of Huai Manor looking around in a daze, thinking that there was something I had forgotten but unable to remember anything. Suddenly, an old woman was standing in front of me, a gold pin in her hair, dressed in fine clothes, her hair gray and her face wrinkled. She was looking at me resentfully.

"Jing Weiyi, I never thought I would spend my whole life with you like this. Is this what they call growing old and gray together?"

I looked closely at her and determined that she might be… the princess.

She laughed sadly. Her features slowly became youthful, until she looked as the princess had looked before. She stared at me and said emphatically, "Jing Weiyi, though you have possessed my body all my life, you will never have my heart!"

I was petrified. I recalled in bewilderment that I never had possessed the princess's body. I wanted to tell her this, but I couldn't speak. The princess and the scene in front of me blurred. Someone was calling, "Your Highness, Your Highness…"

My eyes flew open, and I found myself lying in bed. Beside me was the sound of weeping. I turned my head. Someone was sitting at my bedside, wiping away tears as she looked at me. It was the princess again.

The servants crowding behind her were also wiping their tears. Sobbing, the princess said, "Your Highness, at last you're awake… Is there anything you want to say… Any last words… You can say them…" She sniffled.

I opened my mouth and still could not utter a sound. My whole body felt heavy. My arms and legs did not seem to belong to me. I couldn't move.

The princess grabbed my hand, which lay outside the covers. "Your Highness, there is something… that I must tell you… I have wronged you… Though we have been together so many years, I never loved you… Before I married you, I was already in love with another. I'm sorry, I tried, but I couldn't forget him. My heart is the only thing I could not give you…"

I shuddered. With a start, I sat up, sweat soaking through my sleeping robe. This time I was really awake.

I drank some cold tea, donned an outer robe, and left the hold. The night breeze was crisp. It gradually dried my sweat-soaked inner robe.

It was all right. It had only been a dream.

Such a thing could only happen in a dream. Now no one would grow old with me.

I sighed morosely. From a distance, someone asked, "Is that Master Zhao standing on the bow at night?"

I looked to the side and saw a man standing on deck at the fore of Wan Qianshan's big ship. He saluted me by lantern light. "If Master Zhao is having trouble sleeping, why not come aboard my ship and drink with me?"

"There is wine on this ship too," I said. "Will Master Wan come here to drink?"

"Very well," said Wan Qianshan. He turned and clapped his hands. At once a boat was prepared for him.

Shortly after, he was standing on the boat, slowly floating over. He came up on deck and went into the ship's hold with me.

I trimmed the candle wick to brighten the flame. He sat at the table. I filled the cup in front of him from a pitcher. He looked at it and frowned. "This seems to be tea."

I sat down across from him. "Tea is not like wine, and you, Lord Yun, are not like your brother."

The man across from me laughed and peeled a diaphanously thin object off his face, revealing Yun Yu's features. On the left side of his face was a slightly swollen bruise, and a cut at the corner of his mouth. He looked a bit of a mess.

Surprised, I said, "What happened…"

Yun Yu pointed to the injuries to his face. "Oh, this? My brother punched me."

"Why did he do that?"

Yun Yu's lips tilted up. "First, on account of family matters. He resents our father but still disapproves of my actions. Second, when I've come running like this, he can't resist calling me a lackey and casting aspersions on my moral character."

He tossed the mask on the table. "I told him that, since he'd already punched me, he might as well let me travel with him."

I glanced at the mask. "I was wondering how you'd gotten your hands on a thing like this. So it's your brother's."

Yun Yu smiled.

I couldn't stand the sight of the injuries to his face any longer. I rooted around in my baggage and found a box of balm. "This will reduce the swelling and bruising.

Apply some after you've washed your face."

Yun Yu took the balm and thanked me. In the dim light, I looked into his eyes and asked a little uncertainly, "Weren't you managing the flooding in Chengzhou?"

Why had he suddenly turned up here? Why had he been standing at the fore of the ship in the middle of the night? Why had he spoken to me? Invited me to drink with him?

The candle flame leapt in Yun Yu's eyes, making it hard for me to read his mood.

After a while, he finally said, "I received a message from Zhang Ping while in Chengzhou. He was worried Deng Tan and the rest were unreliable, so I handed over responsibility for managing the flooding to Prince Dai and traveled nonstop to get here."

So that was it.

"His Majesty is asleep," I said. "This evening he went out to the market with Liu Tongyi and others. There were no incidents."

Yun Yu nodded. "I am aware of this. I caught up in the evening. It seems His Majesty still wants Liu Tongyi to return to court."

That was Liu Tongyi's affair. I couldn't comment on it, so I brushed past and changed the subject. "You're not sleeping. Are you really standing watch through the night like a guard?"

Yun Yu yawned. "That's right. When the ship is moored for the night, greater caution is required. During the day, when the ship is in motion, I can rest a little. As I was looking out, I happened to see Master Zhao standing at the fore of the ship and wanted to invite you to drink with me."

"Fair," I said. "Two people talking through the night is more pleasant than staying up alone. But making yourself up to look like your brother was a superfluous gesture. Your figures and voices are very different. If even I could spot it at a glance, His Majesty would certainly have no trouble."

Smiling, Yun Yu said, "That's true." He put the mask away.

He and I drank tea and chatted idly till daybreak. He spoke of interesting events at court over the past few years, and I talked about things I'd picked up while wandering.

At dawn, Yun Yu made to leave. I kept him back. "Why not have breakfast before you go? You can see His Majesty that way. Perhaps when he wakes up, he'll hear that you came aboard, and it won't look good if you don't go visit."

"All right," said Yun Yu, and he stayed awhile longer. When it was fully light, I figured that Qizhe would be awake and was about to go out to check when there

came a gentle knock at the door. “Master Zhao, are you up?”

It was the voice of one of the ship’s servants. I said I was.

Some time passed, and I heard another knock. I went to open the door. Two workmen came in carrying a bathing tub, which was full of slightly steaming water.

I was perplexed. My face spasmed in spite of myself. The two workmen put the wooden tub down in the center of the room, then bowed their heads and left.

I called them back. “I always bathe before bed. Why have you brought water in the morning?”

One of them, head bowed, said, “It was the general manager who instructed us to prepare it.”

Yun Yu snorted, then burst out laughing.

I stood next to the bathing tub, caught between the equally inappropriate options of sending it away and letting it stay.

Smiling, Yun Yu said, “The water’s already here. It would be a waste to send it away. Just take another bath. I’m going to pay my respects.” He stood and left languidly.

I had no choice but to wash again. I was a little tired after staying up all night, and the bath did make me feel much more alert. On my way out the door, I accidentally bumped my leg badly against a chair. I was hobbling a little when I left.

In the hall, Liu Tongyi was sitting alone drinking tea. I looked around and didn’t see Yun Yu, and I didn’t see Qizhe either. Liu Tongyi said, “Your nephew and Little Young Master Wan have just gone to the Wan merchant ship.” He called for breakfast.

The breakfast porridge and side dishes were quite bland. I asked for a bowl of chili sauce to dip my dumplings in. Liu Tongyi’s chopsticks paused in midair as he served himself. “The kitchen forgot to prepare it.” He picked up some bamboo shoots and put them into his bowl of porridge.

After eating, my leg still hurt. I had given Yun Yu my balm last night, so I said to Liu Tongyi, “Do you have any kind of balm or tincture for bumps and bruises?”

Liu Tongyi looked at me with a complicated expression and said calmly, “Yes, I’ll have someone bring it.”

Shortly, a servant brought the balm. Liu Tongyi took it and had a look. “Why did you bring this one?” he said. “Go bring the snow balm from the Healer’s Hall to Master Zhao’s room.”

I looked at the bottle. It was bruise liniment made by the Academy of Internal Medicine, an excellent product, so I said, "This will do."

Liu Tongyi gave me another unreadable look. "This balm contains mint. Better switch to something milder."

Enlightenment immediately came to me. My face spasmed again. I simply picked up my robe and raised my pant leg. "I just bumped my leg. Balm with mint is perfect."

Liu Tongyi again looked at me with a complicated expression. He said nothing. The servant handed the medicine bottle to me.

The morning was hot. I went back to my cabin to get a fan and right away saw a box of medicine on the table. On the lid of the box were the impressively carved words "Healer's Hall."

I couldn't take it any longer. I grabbed the box of balm, put it into my robes, and went to see Liu Tongyi.

He was reading in his room, his brow tightly furrowed, his expression severe. I closed the door and solemnly said, "Master Mei, Lord Yun and I only drank tea and chatted last night. And anyway…"

Though what came next was embarrassing to say, I still said it proudly: "Since I was first inducted into the mysteries, I, Jing Weiyi, have never taken the passive role."

Liu Tongyi put down his book. He seemed at a bit of a loss. His face and neck flushed slightly. It was the first time I had seen him incapable of coming up with a response. It was an interesting look on him.

I went to his table and sat down, picked up a teapot, and poured myself a cup. "There was never love between me and Yun Yu, and all there is now is guilt. I'm going to Java in a few days. Some entanglements that either never existed or have already ruptured will bear no more fruit."

When I said this, I still felt a slight stinging and ache in my heart. In fact, it was only last night that I had entirely given up on certain ideas.

I had once believed that Yun Yu might feel something for me.

He and I had been drinking companions, fellow revelers. There had to be some kind of feeling there.

That night in Chengzhou had brought a bit of life to my dead hopes. It was only last night that I had finally come to a full understanding.

Yun Yu had never had feelings for me. I ought to have known it that day at Yuehua Pavilion.

That day, Yun Yu was drowning his sorrows in wine, but when I held him, he was rigid. I could feel the fine hairs on his skin standing up under my palms, and his irrepressible shudders and gooseflesh.

People always lie to themselves, but no matter how much you lie, there always remains a line you cannot cross. Therefore, you can lie to yourself so much that even you believe it, but you still cannot make the lie true.

Liu Tongyi finally recovered his usual manner and picked up his book. "I should not speak of others' personal affairs. But to the best of my knowledge, Lord Yun and His Majesty have never had the relationship that… some people guess."

When he said this, I froze. My heart shuddered.

"I see," I said.

Liu Tongyi was still holding his book. "Lord Yun was under imperial orders to manage the flooding in Chengzhou. Even upon learning that His Majesty was here, it would have been most natural for Prince Dai to come. If His Majesty wished to see Lord Yun, or Lord Yun needed to speak to His Majesty about something, it might have waited until after they returned to the capital…"

At this point, he looked at the book and said nothing more.

"Yes," I said.

Liu Tongyi was still holding the book. He stared at the book, and I stared at him, waiting for him to look at me.

He was very persistent. I waited for ages, and his gaze remained stubbornly glued to the book. He even turned a page.

I made conversation. "What are you reading? Is it so fascinating?" I craned my neck to look. "An almanac? Is Master Mei planning to open a new shop? Do you need to pick an auspicious date?"

A swift look of distress passed over Liu Tongyi's face. It was only for an instant, but I still caught it. However, with composure, he shut the almanac. "There are some other things I need to check dates for."

Smiling, I said, "Master Mei's explanation to me just now was very much in the style of the Court of Judicial Review. Here I thought that those who had held office at the Court of Judicial Review weren't particular about dates."

"Only Zhang Ping is not particular," said Liu Tongyi.

I rotated my teacup and said to him, "I think that what Master Mei said earlier is very true. I wonder if Master Mei might have any other opinions to share with me."

Expression still composed, Liu Tongyi said, "Also… arriving here and not going directly to see His Majesty isn't Lord Yun's style."

As our eyes met, I felt a riot of emotion.

Everything Liu Tongyi was saying had already occurred to me. Only—

A thought flashed through my mind. Quickly, I said to Liu Tongyi, "Oh, yes, books often mention masks to change your appearance. Have you seen such things in reality?"

Liu Tongyi nodded. "Yes… There have been some cases involving so-called gentlemen of the road, and the Court of Judicial Review has some in its storehouse."

I asked Liu Tongyi whether he knew how long it took to make a mask.

Liu Tongyi thought about it. "Back when my… I once went out of my way to verify that. Making a mask is very time-consuming. Even the greatest master craftsman would need at minimum six or seven shichen to complete one."

"Is it possible to start one at sundown and have it ready by midnight?" I asked.

Liu Tongyi shook his head. "Impossible. The mask must be designed, then a mold created, and then the mask must be molded. Some use human skin, but most use a special kind of adhesive wax. Then it must be dried and modified. One way or another, there is no way it can be completed within a couple of shichen."

I leapt to my feet. "Ran… Master Mei, can you do me another favor? Approach Wan Qianshan's ship. I have urgent business aboard it. As fast as you can!"

Liu Tongyi also stood. His eyes paused on my face. "All right," he said.

Wan Qianshan's merchant ship was traveling ahead of Liu Tongyi's ship, with boats carrying imperial guards in between.

As Liu Tongyi's ship swiftly gained on the Wan ship, the imperial guards thought that our ship had been boarded by assassins targeting Qizhe. Fighting nearly broke out. Then Deng Tan brought people aboard himself to search the ship and determined all was well. Finally the ship was permitted to approach. Up ahead, Wan Qianshan's vessel temporarily pulled in to the shore and stopped.

Seeing that they were willing to stop, I heaved a sigh of relief. Accompanied by Deng Tan and a number of guards, I jumped aboard Wan Qianshan's ship.

A man with the look of a steward came forward. I grabbed him and asked, "Where are Master Wan and his little brother?"

The steward said ponderously, "Do you mean Young Master Daoshui, sir? He and our master are sitting with the young gentleman who came this morning. Have you come to see the young gentleman, sir?"

Deng Tan was muttering beside me: "Notice up ahead, notice up ahead, notice up ahead…"

I ignored this and said to the steward, "No, I have come to see Master Wan's little brother, Young Master Wan Daoshui." As I said this, I stepped right into the hold.

Deng Tan and some guards followed me closely. "Notice up ahead, notice up ahead, notice up ahead…"

I glimpsed a page who had been on deck just now and slipped off to somewhere rejoin us and hurry toward a door.

Just as the page was caught at the door, I pushed the door open. I saw Qizhe, Yun Yu, and Wan Qianshan seated in chairs. There was also a group of dancing girls standing frozen.

Qizhe raised his eyebrows. Wan Qianshan stood, laughing. Before anyone could speak, I strode in and grabbed Yun Yu by the arm.

Yun Yu had still been seated. Now he stood and looked directly at me. "What is it?"

"Naturally, I want to talk to you," I said.

The corners of Yun Yu's lips turned up slightly. "Oh? What is it that calls for Master Zhao to…"

I drew close to his ear and whispered, "Come outside with me. We can't talk here." I pulled him out of the room with me.

Yun Yu froze for a moment, then allowed me to pull him out. We left the ship's hold and went up on deck. Yun Yu finally came to a halt. "Any further and we'll be in the river. Where are you taking me?"

"You might as well jump with me," I said.

Yun Yu's expression stilled. Smiling, he said, "That won't do. I'm a poor swimmer, and I won't enjoy being a water ghoul."

"Actually, I can't swim either," I said. "I just want to see, before you and I drown, which of us tells the truth first."

Yun Yu looked at me again and said, "If we open our mouths, the water will get in. How will we be able to say anything?"

"We can say it in our hearts," I said, "and the other will still hear."

Smiling, Yun Yu said, "Perhaps this technique is written of in a new romance Master Zhao has read. I haven't read about, and it is beyond me. There is a retiring room on this ship. Liu Tongyi's ship might not have anything as reliable. Why don't we go there and have a talk."

"Very well," I said.

With me aboard, Deng Tan and the others, out of concern for His Majesty's safety, invited Qizhe to come aboard Liu Tongyi's ship.

After Qizhe left, the ships slowly continued forward.

Yun Yu took me to a cabin with empty rooms on either side: a good place to talk.

"Wine or tea?" Yun Yu asked.

I thought about it. "Wine, please."

Yun Yu smiled and called for good Huadiao to be brought. He closed the door, and the fragrance of the wine hovered in the cabin. He poured and asked me, "I suppose we can talk now. What did Master Zhao want with me?"

"I came to see you so I could say one thing," I said. "Suiya, I love you."

Yun Yu's hand paused in midair. He put down his wine cup and stared at me.

"I've been to many places these past few years, seen many people. I thought I had forgotten the past, but it won't stay forgotten. You can fool anyone but yourself. I thought you had been lying to me from the first. But why did you come see me when we were in Chengzhou? Why did you appear last night? Life is short and bitter, and souls and reincarnation are unknowable. Perhaps this one life is all there is. I can't keep lying to myself. So—"

Yun Yu's expression was unfathomable. He picked up: "So you had Liu Tongyi chase after this ship so you could come aboard, then said you wanted me to jump into the river with you, and now all of this?"

I gripped his wrist. "Suiya."

Yun Yu looked into my eyes. The corners of his lips twitched. "I don't believe you."

I frowned. "Why not? Must I dig out my heart before you'll believe me?"

"Even the village boys have worn that line threadbare." Yun Yu sneered. "Your Highness Prince Huai's joke is pretty funny."

I looked at him with my brows drawn together, then simply pulled him up, took aim at his lips, and closed the distance.

Yun Yu's body stiffened in my embrace. Heedless, I pried his teeth apart. Soon, Yun Yu responded. His body gradually relaxed.

I released him, caught my breath, and said quietly, "Now do you believe me?"

Yun Yu was still watching me with an unreadable expression. "No," he spat.

"Why not?" I said.

"Why did you give me that pill?" Yun Yu said slowly.

My heart stuttered.

When the rebellion had been close at hand, Yun Yu had come to me one day for a heart-to-heart talk. He said to me that there was no knowing whether our uprising would succeed. If it failed and we were captured, we were certain to suffer all the world's tortures. It was best to be prepared.

My heart had gone cold. I asked him whether he had made preparations.

Yun Yu said that of course he had. He even took out a medicine vial and showed it to me. It contained an extremely potent poison. I watched him drip a bit on the stone table, and its surface bubbled.

I said to him at once, *That one's no good, drinking it will be painful.* I took him to my bedroom and, from a hidden drawer, took two pills, which I showed to him, and said, *This is a secret drug I ordered made, guaranteed to be fatal, as well as fast and painless. A true marvel.*

I threw his vial away, found another one, put one pill inside it, and gave it to him as a precaution. Yun Yu accepted it solemnly.

Yun Yu looked at me coldly now and said, "It was indeed immediately effective. It was quick, and the effects were impressive. I had the runs so badly I didn't leave the latrine for a day and a night."

My palms broke into a cold sweat. "Why… why would you take it?"

With no expression on his face, Yun Yu said, "I have never liked owing a debt. It was I who tricked you, so it was only natural that I make it up to you with my life. But it seemed to me you were telling me that my life wasn't good enough to pay the debt."

He laughed coldly. "I thought then that there was truly no call for that. A loyal and heroic subject like Your Highness was certain to be deified after death, while I was sure to go to hell. Even if there is a life after death, you and I would never meet."

Suddenly, I wasn't sure what I could do.

Yun Yu, Yun Yu—what kind of a person are you?

How can I ever understand you?

Yun Yu looked at me again. There was another change in his expression. He laughed helplessly. "Then I saw that note. Thank you for enlightening me."

I had been afraid that when Yun Yu was captured, he would do something drastic before I could get to him, so I had hidden a last trick in the vial. Inside the lining was a note I had written:

Letting loose clears the mind. Let all things loose.

Yun Yu sighed. "I simply couldn't understand how the man who could do such a thing would choose to kill himself. It was only three years later, when someone saw you at Liu Tongyi's firm and reported it to the court, that I knew you had been faking."

I'd had everything planned out, but this was a fresh surprise, and my heart was in chaos.

I looked intently into his eyes. "Yun Yu." I no longer knew who I was. Prince Huai, Jing Weiyi? No. Zhao Cai? Also no.

Softly, I said, "Suiya, call me Chengjun."

He smiled. "I've always wanted to, but I'm not Jing Qizhe. If I called you that, it would be mixing up the generations. Imperial Uncle."

When I heard this, the whole world became a vast blank.

It was true. Like Qizhe, Qitan, and the others, he ought to be calling me Imperial Uncle.

"Imperial Uncle," he said, "you and I have said many things today, all words from the heart. Words from Jing Weiyi and Yun Yu's hearts. But this spectacle must end now. Because I know that in reality, you came here and said these things for Jing Qizhe's sake. When you called me Yun Yu, you already knew who I was."

Yes, I knew who he was, but I had lied to myself, always said to myself, perhaps I had guessed wrong. This was impossible. He was Yun Yu.

Yun Yu looked directly at me. "When did you find out?"

I heard my own voice say slowly, "When Yun Tang was plotting to rebel, there was something I couldn't understand. He was only a civil official, with no direct military authority. Even if his rebellion succeeded, how was he planning to make the people submit to his rule…"

After I encountered Yun Yu in Chengzhou, there were still some things that surpassed my understanding.

Yun Yu wasn't sloppy. In Chengzhou, he had let me and Liu Tongyi leave. Afterward, when we encountered Yun Zai, and later, when I saw Yun Yu on the Wan ship, I found it very strange.

Yun Yu said he had come for Qizhe.

But since Qizhe had decided to travel, all the appropriate arrangements must have been made. Though I did not have a deep understanding of Zhang Ping, I still thought that he wouldn't have sent a Ministry of Works official in the course of managing a flood to run off to guard the emperor. Not to mention that Qitan had

also been in Chengzhou then.

It was the same as Yun Zai's ship inexplicably following us the whole time.

It couldn't be for my or Liu Tongyi's sake, so it could only be for Qizhe's.

Last night, Yun Yu had impersonated Yun Zai and met me.

Liu Tongyi had told me that making a mask required a great deal of time. So the mask Yun Yu had used to impersonate Yun Zai had not been made at the last moment.

There were a few possibilities then. First, that Yun Yu often impersonated Yun Zai as he moved through the world; second, that in the course of Yun Zai's large-scale business, he had engaged in some dishonest practices, and in the interests of safety, he had his trusted associates impersonate him. Therefore, he would have these things ready.

Yun Yu never did anything superfluous; when he had made Liu Tongyi and Chu Xun perform a duet, in reality, he had been telling me that the two of them were acquainted.

That Yun Zai had punched Yun Yu showed that his discord with Yun Tang had not led him to cut off all emotional ties.

When the rupture between Yun Zai and Yun Tang had taken place, Yun Tang had not yet achieved high rank or reached the point where he could contemplate rebellion.

When he had sent his eldest son away, he had been planning for the future. This was even stranger.

This reminded me that after I faked my death and fled the capital, while we idled in Qincai Alley, Zhang Xiao had said to me, "The princess was always worried that this would happen, because even if Your Highness does not have the high merit of the late Prince Huai, Huai Manor still knows too many secrets."

In addition to his military honors, my father, it turned out, had also been mixed up in the case of a bastard of imperial blood.

Zhang Xiao and Chief Steward Cao knew only the outlines of the situation. The Tongguang emperor had once had a brief affair with a common woman.

Empress Liu had died of illness, and the Tongguang emperor had found solitude unbearable. This romance had taken place during an outing from the palace.

And the woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son.

The Tongguang emperor did not acknowledge the mother and child, nor did he bring them into the palace. I didn't know the precise reason for this, but it was a wise move. The child's mother was humble, without backing. He was better off

outside the palace.

My father looked after mother and child in secret. Later, the Tongguang emperor passed away, and the late emperor inherited the throne. During this fuss, there was a flood in the woman's hometown, and my father lost track of them.

"My father once said that my grandfather and grandmother met under the haitang blossoms. That was why he was named Tang."

He smiled. "In fact, my brother has no intention of harming His Majesty, but for better or worse, he and His Majesty are first cousins. He wanted to have a chat. You were making too much of it, Imperial Uncle."

I really would rather have been dead than hear him call me that, but he kept saying it.

"Imperial Uncle," he said, "I'm actually the same as Jing Qizhe and Jing Qitan."

My head was splitting. I almost wanted to pull out a knife and cut off my ears.

Yun Yu was looking at me and smiling. "Imperial Uncle, if my brother and I really had wanted to do something to Jing Qizhe today, what would you have done to us? What would you have done to me?"

I stood, leaning against the table. "There is no 'if,' because nothing happened. His Majesty just came aboard the Wan ship for a visit. There was nothing else. Nothing at all happened."

"That's right," said Yun Yu. "There was nothing. From the very first, there was nothing."

There could only be nothing.

So what did everything that had come before mean? What should I make of it?

If even Yun Yu was false, what was true? I asked myself this, and I asked Yun Yu.

The corners of Yun Yu's mouth twitched. His voice was calm. "The only thing that's true is that I am your imperial nephew, Imperial Uncle."

In the evening, the ship stopped at Linqiao Town. Another day's travel, and we would reach Suzhou.

When I left the Wan ship, before I could return to Liu Tongyi's ship, I saw a handful of people on the pier dressed in square-necked jackets like servants. They arrived at Liu Tongyi's ship and whispered to a guard. One took something from his sleeve and flashed it at the guard, who hastily let them aboard.

As I watched this, someone next to me said, "You aren't going back aboard, Master Uncle?"

I looked back. It was Deng Tan, who had come up behind me unnoticed. I said, "I am. Did these people come from back home?"

Deng Tan followed me aboard as he said, "Precisely. The young master has been away too long, naturally they're getting worried at home. It must be Madam hurrying him home."

I entered the hold. Wang You stood alone in the hall. He bowed to me. "We were just waiting for you, Master Uncle. Please go to the young master's room to talk."

I followed him to Qizhe's door. The handful of servants from earlier were just leaving. Qizhe's voice came from the door, which stood ajar: "Is Uncle out there?"

This meant there was no need to announce me, so I opened the door and went in. Wang You closed it behind me.

Qizhe was sitting at the table. He put down his teacup. Before I could get down on my knees, he said, "Rise."

I thanked him for his graciousness. Qizhe pointed at the chair next to him. "Sit."

I hesitated slightly, then sat. Qizhe said, "Why have you only grown more cautious at this stage, Imperial Uncle?"

"The closer to the end, the more cautious one becomes," I said.

Qizhe silently cast down his eyes.

After a while, he finally said, "We are returning to the capital tonight."

"Your Majesty ought to have returned to the capital before now," I said. "First, because without a ruler at court, it is difficult to meet great events with decision. Second, Your Majesty's health is precious. You should not spend too long out in the world."

"Our health is precious?" said Qizhe. "If we were not emperor, we would be a prince much like Qitan now, perhaps also running around digging up antiques and admiring trinkets at home."

"Your Majesty could never be a spendthrift like Prince Dai," I said sincerely.

Qizhe raised his eyebrows and looked at me. He laughed. "That's true." The smile faded from his lips. He looked into my eyes. "You do not hate us, Imperial Uncle?"

"One performs the actions suited to one's station," I said. "I understand this."

Qizhe looked down again. "We are glad you understand. We will have Wang You follow you."

Qizhe never let anything slip by him. "As you command," I said.

Qizhe looked at me again. "It seems you do harbor some resentment. It is impossible that you would not. If there is anything else you want, you may tell us."

"I have already done everything I have been thinking of," I said. "There is nothing else."

The smile once again hovered at the corners of Qizhe's lips. "Imperial Uncle is truly direct. We are very much afraid a-Yu will be unwilling to return to court with us."

"Lord Yun is Your Majesty's subject," I said. "It would make no sense for him not to return to court."

When I bade farewell and made to leave the room, Qizhe suddenly said, "Imperial Uncle."

I turned back, but saw him stand there and look at me, then turn away. "Go ahead, Imperial Uncle."

I opened the door and went out. I remembered one time, a decade or more ago, when Qizhe had called to me like this.

He had just ascended the throne then, a child who had just lost his father, in court dress with his little face all tense, with a guarded look for everyone. Once someone had sent a newly weaned snow leopard cub to Huai Manor. Supposedly it could be trained to hunt if it was fed raw meat growing up. While the leopard cub was curled up in a corner of its cage, not making a sound, the look in its eyes had been identical to Qizhe's then.

When he held his seal with both hands to affix it, they were very steady. At court when he said, "Rise," or, "Granted," his voice was very firm. Every time I saw him, he was in the imperial study, but when I went in, there was nothing on the desk, or else only some light reading laid out.

I knew the empress dowager must have said something to him. When he spoke to me, his manner and tone were both studiously correct.

Thank you for coming to see us, Imperial Uncle.

We are very well, Imperial Uncle. We have not been ill recently. There is no call for your solicitude.

It was all of this sort. Not like before, when he had always been coming to Huai Manor.

Occasionally, I brought curious baubles with me to amuse him, and at first, he couldn't resist looking at them, at which point I would as before offer up the item and say, *Does this please Your Majesty*?

He would say mildly, "Thank you, Imperial Uncle," and permit me to put the item on the desk, cast down his eye to hide his wariness.

I hated to see the empress dowager teaching a perfectly nice child to behave like this, but I did understand that as emperor, he could be no other way.

So I stopped going to see him privately and let Qitan and Qifei have their pick of the baubles.

But one day, when the empress dowager bade me come to the inner palace to talk, I went to look in on Qizhe. He was in his sleeping quarters for once, but there were only two or three attendants there.

An attending eunuch said that His Majesty was engaged in a few days of self-reflection. The empress dowager had given instructions that he needed only a few servants to attend.

I recalled then that, because Qizhe was usually a bit picky about his food, a remonstrating official had submitted a memorial on this subject, advising that His Majesty's daily expenses were too extravagant. I'd heard that Qizhe had issued an edict that he would engage in self-reflection, and the empress dowager had issued her own edict that His Majesty's self-reflection was to be supervised.

I entered the imperial sleeping quarters and found them bare, all playthings and decorations put away, the silk-embroidered landscapes on the walls changed for some characterless works of ink wash painting and calligraphy conveying some mean poems. The heavy curtains embroidered with dragons had been swapped for nondescript drapes that were neither blue nor purple. The whole impressive set of imperial sleeping quarters had been turned into a hovel out of fiction.

It was summer. From the imperial bed's four posts hung an aged curtain, and it was laid with a straw mat. A wretched child dressed in a burlap robe sat feebly on the edge of the bed, his little face yellow as a candle. Yet this was the present Son of Heaven, my imperial nephew.

The eunuch said that His Majesty had been diligently studying statecraft for some days, hard at work poring over his books, rising with the rooster's crow and going to sleep at the third watch of the night, eating the most meager diet. As he spoke, he surreptitiously wiped the corner of his eye with his sleeve. I did not know whether it was out of admiration or pity for the emperor.

The enfeebled Qizhe saw me and managed to rouse himself a little. "Imperial Uncle has come to see us. Please sit."

I sat on a chair covered with a straw mat. Looking at his pitiful yellow face, a fire flared up in my guts. The empress dowager, that stupid woman, and those so-called loyalists, and their so-called overcorrection—this was it. Even to establish a good reputation, was it necessary to torment a child like this for the sake of appearances?

If even the emperor went hungry and lived in a hovel, what prosperity could there be for the empire?

By my own temper, I would have immediately had these ostentatious trappings changed, and ordered the imperial kitchens to send out a substantial meal. But these were the emperor's sleeping quarters, and however powerful my distaste, I was still a subject. Just then, heaven came to my aid. Black clouds gathered, the sky darkened, and a low roar of thunder rumbled.

"It is raining," said Qizhe. "Stay a little longer, Imperial Uncle."

This phrasing was meant as a dismissal, but I said, "Then I thank Your Majesty for your favor." I looked at the hourglass. "It grows late. It must be time for Your Majesty's supper."

"We… have lately been engaged in self-reflection, eating one meal per day," said Qizhe. "We already ate at midday."

I deliberately rubbed my belly. "I hold Your Majesty's actions in esteem. I ought to emulate them."

As I expected, Qizhe said, "Are you hungry, Imperial Uncle? We will order a meal prepared for you."

I hastily said, "If Your Majesty is not eating, I would not dare."

In a timely manner, the eunuch put in, "Your Eternal Majesty, as His Highness Prince Huai is here today, there is no harm in making an exception."

Qizhe must have been starving. After a little more encouragement from us both, he nodded and said, "Very well, have the imperial kitchens prepare supper."

"I enjoy wine," I said. "Will Your Majesty grant me permission to drink?"

"Granted," said Qizhe.

With wine, there had to be meat.

The imperial kitchens must have felt stifled lately and itched to make a display of their skills. Though there were only ten or so dishes, two soups, six kinds of pastry, and all the meat was chicken, duck, or fish, the dishes were exquisite, the flavors perfect. I concentrated on eating, pretending I didn't notice Qizhe quietly wolfing down his food.

When the meal was over, it was already dark. A few small lamps were lit in the imperial chambers. Their light was dim and dusky.

When I stood and took my leave, an unheralded flash of lightning lit the sky, setting off an earthshaking clap of thunder. As I walked toward the door, I heard Qizhe behind me say, "Imperial Uncle."

I turned back and saw him standing all alone in the midst of the enormous sleeping chamber. The shadows cast by the lamplight were elongated and overlapping, like a gathering of apparitions.

"Imperial Uncle… the storm is at its strongest, why not… stay awhile longer."

So I turned back and picked out some segments of legends to tell him. I told one after another, until it was nearly the third watch of the night, and all the while, Qizhe refused to go to sleep. The storm outside was still raging, with no break in the thunder and lightning.

I said, "In ancient times, on stormy nights, loyal ministers and able generals often took up swords and stood watch over the emperor through the night. I have a favor to ask of Your Majesty now. My leg is damaged, so I cannot take to the battlefield to show my loyalty to Your Majesty. Please grant me an opportunity to be a loyal subject. Allow me to stand watch over Your Majesty tonight."

Qizhe looked at me with his eyes bright in the lamplight. "Permission granted," he said.

The attendants conveyed word from the inner chamber to the outer chamber, and a mat was laid for me. Qizhe finally went to bed.

The attendants let down the bed curtains. I lay down on the mat. From within the curtains, I heard Qizhe's childish voice say, "Imperial Uncle."

I said, "I am here."

"When our father passed away, it was also storming like this. Our mother told us that our father would come back to see both of us. But we have never seen our father. Will he really come back to see us?"

If the late emperor really could see us at this very moment, I thought, he would be utterly despondent.

But such an irreverent thought had to remain in my own mind.

"The empress dowager surely would not lie to Your Majesty," I said. "When my father passed away, my mother said the same thing to me."

At length, a sound of assent came from inside the curtains.

It was a long time later that I fell into a doze.

My staying the night in the imperial sleeping quarters later provoked censure from many ministers, and became one more piece of evidence of my attempts to usurp the throne. With my reputation already what it was, they might say whatever they liked.

Whether many years later, when Qizhe recalled that event, he would also think I was attempting to usurp the throne, I could not say. When a person grew up,

everything would change. Just as the Qizhe of back then had grown into the emperor of today. There were no certainties.

After nightfall, a number of carriages arrived on shore. Liu Tongyi and I respectfully saw off the emperor in the ship's hold. Smiling brightly, Qizhe said to me, "Uncle, you should also hurry back, or you'll be missed at home."

"Safe travels," I said.

To outsiders, this must have been a scene of perfect harmony between uncle and nephew.

"These past few days have been an imposition on Master Mei," said Qizhe.

Liu Tongyi bowed. "Not at all."

Deng Tan and the others crowded around Qizhe as he boarded his carriage. The carriages all receded into the distance in the night. Behind me, Wang You said, "It is late. What do you wish to eat for dinner, Master Uncle? I will arrange it."

"Steward Wang is a guest as well," said Liu Tongyi. "Allow me to undertake expenses for meals." He ordered a room prepared for Wang You.

Wang You said, "I do not dare to impose on Master Mei. I will wait personally on Master Uncle, or else my master will reproach me on my return."

Liu Tongyi smiled and said, "Very well."

I stood on deck looking out. The Wan ship stood beside us, blazing with light. Through the open windows, the scene of two men drinking and watching a performance could be faintly seen; they were Yun Zai and Yun Yu.

After dinner, Liu Tongyi said he wished to check the accounts for the silk purchase with me. He asked if it was a convenient time. Then he said to Wang You, "Steward Wang can also help Master Zhao make sure that I have left no omissions in my accounts."

Wang You said, "How could a servant like me dare to interfere with Master Uncle's business? I will attend outside. Just call me when you would like tea."

I went with Liu Tongyi to his bedroom. Liu Tongyi shut the door and took a letter from his sleeve. He dipped his finger in tea and wrote on the table: *Zhang Ping*.

I took the letter and tore it open. The letter consisted of a scant few words:

Your Highness Prince Huai, I know of all that took place in the past. But I hope we will live in harmony and the nation will be at peace.

My heart chilled. Zhang Ping really was somebody. Even this he had uncovered. But why had he written me this letter?

Liu Tongyi took the letter and burned it.

I watched the last bit of paper turn to ash. "Soon it will be beyond me to meddle. He ought to keep his attention on matters that merit it."

Liu Tongyi poured some tea into the bowl holding the ashes, opened the window, emptied the bowl outside, and let the window screen down. "Chief Steward Wang is…"

"Keeping an eye on me to ensure I make a clean exit," I said.

Liu Tongyi said, "Tomorrow we will reach Suzhou. What plans does Master Zhao have for the future?"

I paused, then said, "Master Mei, I am going to be brazen again and ask for your help with some things. May I?"

Liu Tongyi looked at me and said nothing.

So I continued, "In Suzhou, I will hire a carriage and go straight to the sea. Perhaps I will never return. During my years doing business, I've accumulated a bit of property, which I can't take with me. I'd like to ask you to take it. What you have a use for, you can keep if you don't mind. Whatever you don't, you can give to others or throw away as you see fit."

Liu Tongyi said, "The luggage Master Zhao brought aboard did not look like much to me. Why can't you take it to sea with you?"

"There isn't much luggage," I said, "but there's the shop in Chengzhou, which I hope Master Mei can look after for me. I also have some silver banknotes here which can be exchanged throughout the country. I won't be able to use them when I go abroad, and I can't carry that much gold and silver. Please take them for me, Master Mei. You can give them to Prince Dai whenever he gets into a hole again. Other people can also find a use for my things… Also… No, there's nothing else."

Liu Tongyi frowned. "I'm afraid I can't agree."

I hadn't expected him to refuse. I was startled.

Liu Tongyi said, "Master Zhao and I aren't especially close friends, yet you are always asking me to help you with your personal affairs. It doesn't seem appropriate. Perhaps it would be better if Master Zhao found another trustworthy person."

I felt embarrassed, then forced a smile and said, "Master Mei… is right. I have imposed on you too much."

I, Jing Weiyi, had lived thirty-two or thirty-three years, and my life was a failure. Decades at court, over three years roaming the world, and when I needed to commit something to another's care, however I thought about it, the only person I could go

to was Liu Tongyi.

But why should he agree to my request? Did I think that just because he was a gentleman, he was bound to agree?

That really was unreasonable.

When I had this realization, my speech became faltering. "Master Mei… I… did not give this sufficient consideration. Forget I said anything."

Liu Tongyi smiled. "When we reach Suzhou, if you have trouble finding a carriage, I can make arrangements for you."

I clasped my hands. "Thank you."

I returned to my cabin. There were no stirrings from the Wan ship next to us. All remained calm till daybreak.

The next day, we reached Suzhou. I packed my bags in the hold. I thought it would be overhasty to have a last meal on the pier. First I would say goodbye to Liu Tongyi.

I didn't find him in the hall and was about to go to his room, but halfway there, I heard footsteps and saw him coming out. He was carrying a wine pitcher and wine cups.

I had rarely seen him drink. Liu Tongyi put the pitcher and cups on the table. He said, "I do not drink much, but I know Master Zhao enjoys wine, so I have prepared a pitcher of poor wine to bid Master Zhao farewell." He lifted his hand and filled the cups, then raised one. "Take care of yourself when you go."

I picked up the other cup, but the weight in my hand seemed immeasurable. "I have caused you so much trouble. I'm afraid I will never be able to repay you in this life… Look after yourself too."

Liu Tongyi tipped back his head and drank his wine in one gulp. Smiling, I said, "Seeing Master Mei drink so freely, I believe your tolerance isn't as poor as you've always disclaimed. If it were early enough now, I would like to drink to intoxication with you and see who falls first."

Liu Tongyi shook his head, smiling. "I really can't drink. I can handle a few cups, but more than that and I can't walk straight."

The ship gradually slowed as it entered the Suzhou pier.

When the ship was moored, a page came in to tell Liu Tongyi that Ruihe's carriages were here and waiting on shore.

Liu Tongyi said, "If the Wans have no carriage prepared, Master Zhao can choose a couple of carriages to use with Little Young Master Wan and Steward Wang. The

Wans have no residence in Suzhou. If you do not like to stay at an inn, my home has a separate courtyard that is tranquil enough. If you find it adequate, you can spend the night there."

Wang You put in a word, "No need. My master has arranged a carriage for Master Uncle on shore."

Wang You and Ruihe's page helped me move my luggage. We left the hold. Under the setting sun, a man stood alone on the deck of the ship next to us.

I met his eyes. After a while, I raised a hand and said, "Look after yourself."

He said nothing, only slowly turned and went into the hold.

I went down the gangplank and onto the pier. Liu Tongyi stood in front of Ruihe's carriages, looking at me with a confused and doubtful expression.

I smiled at him. "Master Mei, this time it truly is goodbye. You…" Now that it had come to this, I felt that I had absolutely nothing to say. It had to be those two words again: "Take care."

Wang You led a carriage over. I got in, and it jolted ahead. Wang You said respectfully, "Your Highness Prince Huai, His Majesty told me to notify you that if there is still anything you cannot let go of, any place you wish to visit, you should feel free to do so in the next few days."

"There's nothing," I said. "But I spoke of going to sea, so let us head for the sea now."

Wang You said he would obey and stuck his head out of the carriage to give the driver instructions.

I glanced at the bundle next to him and said, "Let me have a look. It's for me anyway."

Wang You hesitated a moment, then trembled as he passed the bundle to me.

I opened it. Inside it was a blue-and-white porcelain jar, cool to the touch. It produced a crisp sound when struck. It was good quality porcelain.

When Qizhe had come to Huai Manor with Qitan and the other princes, in a bout of mischief, they had taken sticks and struck the big vase in the hall, and it had made the same sound. As they struck the vase, they had called out, "Imperial Uncle, Imperial Uncle…"

Chapter Eleven

That day, when Qizhe had seen me alone, when I was in his room, he had also first called out, "Imperial Uncle."

Then he asked me, "Imperial Uncle, what should we do?

"When we learned of the injustice that had been done to you, we blamed ourselves profoundly. We know you did it all for us. Can you tell us what we should do now?"

Yes, what should he do? His Majesty had issued a penitential decree, he had built a tomb, he had established a memorial; but the man who ought to have been asleep in that tomb was running freely out in the world. What was there to be done?

I said, "Prince Huai is dead, there is only…"

Qizhe raised a hand. "Enough, Imperial Uncle, do not trot that out to lie to us both. When you stand there, even with some common name like Gou a-San or Mao a-Si, you are still our Imperial Uncle."[15]

"Your Majesty must not use such examples," I said at once. It was nothing for me to be named Gou a-San or Mao a-Si, but if the emperor were to become Gou a-San or Mao a-Si's nephew, now that really would be…

Qizhe sighed and looked at me.

That look was the same as when he had wanted something when he was little.

"Your Majesty," I said, "I am planning to go to sea, never to return."

Still Qizhe did not speak.

I continued, "If the ship were to encounter a storm and sink, there would be no further cause for concern."

Finally, Qizhe spoke. Distinctly, he said, "Imperial Uncle, do not blame us." He took a small vial from his sleeve.

I accepted it. The vial was made of jade. Because Qizhe had kept it in his sleeve, it was warm from his body.

Qizhe had rarely given me anything. Ever since he was little, he had always taken things from me. I squeezed it and said, "Thank you for this gift, Your Majesty."

Qizhe sighed again.

"Your Majesty," I said, "the only thing is, can it not be on Liu Tongyi's ship?"

Qizhe slowly said, "This drug needs several days to take effect. Do not worry. Imperial Uncle, do you want to return with us to the capital, or…"

"Too many people know me in the capital," I said. "It will be cleaner to handle this elsewhere." I removed the stopper from the vial. It contained a liquid, which was slightly bitter.

Qizhe turned away. After a while, he said, "Imperial Uncle, we promise you that mausoleum will always be yours."

The carriage rattled. I put the jar back into its bundle.

Wang You would use it to take me back to that big tomb. He said hoarsely to me, "Do not worry, Your Highness Prince Huai, that tomb was created on His Majesty's personal orders. I may be getting on in years, but my hands are still steady. I will convey Your Highness there safely."

I said nothing. I lay down in the carriage to doze, then remembered what had happened that day aboard the ship, after I drank from that vial.

I had been about to withdraw then, when Qizhe turned around. "Imperial Uncle, stay and talk to us."

Afterward, Qizhe spoke to me for a long time. He spoke of nothing more momentous than minor doings at court in bygone years. For example, which tree in the palace the late emperor had personally planted, under what circumstances he had planted it, and so on.

He said, *We remember everything about going to visit you when we were little, Imperial Uncle.*

He said, *We have always remembered your kindness to us.*

He said these things as though it were an ordinary conversation. He said, *We have never said these things to anyone else, and we never will again.*

I said, *There is no need for Your Majesty to say this. To make an irreverent comparison, relationships between members of an ordinary family are much closer than those between members of the imperial family. Look at Prince Dai. When he'd nearly emptied out Huai Manor, if he came over and called me Uncle, I still had to give him money. This was only reasonable.*

Huai Manor was seized after I was arrested. The things my father had brought home in years past, and the trinkets I had purchased when I was young, the decorations and jewelry my mother had liked when she was alive, must all have been destroyed or confiscated or pocketed during the seizure.

I remembered a couple of years back when I was in the desert buying sheepskins. I lost a drinking contest with some herders and spent half the night throwing up, then caught a chill and ran a fever. In my delirium, I thought I was still in bed in my bedroom at Huai Manor, and my mother was bringing me a hangover remedy. She berated me as she raised it to my lips, but when I drank it, it tasted of plain water.

When I opened my eyes, I found that I was wrapped in a sheepskin jacket, sleeping on horsehide, with a young woman beside me holding a rough pottery bowl, giving me cold water to drink.

She was ordinary-looking, with a dark ruddy face and coarse hands, but her eyes were bright and clear, with no trace of impurity, perfectly clean. When she smiled at me and showed her white teeth, I thought she was like a goddess.

That girl was Alianna.

When I left, she said she was going to marry a young man who rode a fast horse. Perhaps they even had children now.

The carriage rattled forward. I slept in it awhile. In my dreams, I now saw Qizhe talking to me, now Alianna, now Mija, now Xue'e, now Wanwan. Finally, it was Xiangniang, who had kept a stall at the corner of an alley in a town where I had once stayed.

I hadn't felt like cooking then. Every day I took a small pot and went to her stall to buy noodles with shredded chicken.

I would eat it at midday, then in the evening, add water to the leftovers and eat them as though they were porridge; that made a second meal.

She always gave me extra, filling that little pot right up.

She told me that her husband was dead, and all she had left were two children who had just learned to walk. She said she wanted nothing in life, only to find someone who could support her and her children. She would do everything in her power to treat that person well.

I thought at the time that she was hinting something when she said this to me, but unfortunately, I didn't stay long in that town. Before I left, I wanted to give her some money, but she said she only spent money she had earned herself. I realized then that she had been looking after me, not favoring me.

In my dream, I sold noodles with her at the corner of the alley. She rolled them, and I watched the pot. When the water boiled, I removed the lid, and the steam rushed up into my face. At my feet were children who tugged at my shirt, calling, "Papa, Papa…"

The carriage gave a sudden jolt. I awoke.

Wang You's hoarse voice said, "Your Highness, we're nearly there."

The carriage stopped, and I alighted. Before me was a noisy pier. Ships were anchored near the shore, people came and went, heaps of goods were stacked and carted.

I had thought I might catch a glimpse of boundless waves, but instead we were in an inlet.

A boatman carrying goods by the shore told me that of course a large pier could only be built in an inlet. Beyond this was the open sea.

I looked toward the mouth of the inlet. Wang You said softly behind me, "You can rent a small boat to go have a look, sir. I can do nothing beyond that."

I considered. It ought to be nearly time. Compared to two days ago, my head was heavier, and my steps were a little uncertain, my limbs numb. It might be tonight or tomorrow.

Though a great man can see the whole universe in a grain of sand, faced with that little inlet, I still wanted to go forward and see more. Soon perhaps I would have nothing left, but right now, at least, I could have something.

I circled the pier and found a small boat that transported goods out to the big vessels, but the boatman refused under any circumstances to take me. He said he had taken a job from a big ship and couldn't delay. Even when Wang You gave me silver to tempt him, it still did no good.

The boatman said, "It isn't that I'm unwilling to deal with you, but I've already accepted a job, and I can't delay. We have long-term jobs, not one-offs. Please understand, sir."

In plain terms, he couldn't afford to offend a major customer for the sake of a tiny transaction.

As we spoke, the major customer's ship slowly pulled in and dropped anchor by the shore. I saw a name in large characters at the fore of the ship—Ruihe.

A man with the look of a steward left the ship and bowed to me. "Master Zhao, what a coincidence. We meet again. My master is on the ship and invites you to come aboard."

I went aboard and saw Liu Tongyi standing in front of the hold.

"Master Mei," I said, "is there enough wine on your ship this time?"

Liu Tongyi looked at Wang You behind me, smiled, and said, "Naturally there is wine. There is someone in the hold who wants to say something to Master Zhao."

I entered with Liu Tongyi. He took me to a cabin, knocked twice, and opened the door.

I went in, and the door was gently closed behind me. I heard Liu Tongyi's footsteps walk away.

The man in front of the window turned around and saluted me. "Your Highness Prince Huai."

It was Yun Zai.

"I have traveled on Chancellor Liu's ship in order to thank Your Highness. Thank you for your kindness to the Yun family."

"I shouldn't accept Eldest Young Master Yun's gratitude," I said. "From beginning to end, nothing I have done has been for the sake of the Yun family. There are some things that should remain in the past. They have been buried, so treat them as dirt."

"Please do not worry, Your Highness," said Yun Zai. "My brother has decided to travel the world with me. Henceforth, there will be no Yun family. I only wish to be a law-abiding merchant. Where there have been no entanglements or quarrels before, there will be none now. My brother has already accepted the situation. But he feels truly guilty that Your Highness has been forced to live abroad from now on."

"My situation has nothing to do with that," I said. "This is how government works."

For the imperial family, power and benefit had always been of greatest import. Familial affection was extraneous.

Yun Zai said to me, "Oh, yes, my brother asked me to say some things to Your Highness. First, to ask Your Highness to rest easy. Second, to say that he himself does not know the answer to the question you asked him that day. At first it was false, and while the falsehood became truth, in the end, it was still false."

I said, "Then please convey a message for me, Eldest Young Master Yun. I have always loved him very much, and whether he is Yun Yu or Little Young Master Wan, I hope he takes good care of himself."

Yun Zai bowed to me, then left the cabin.

I stood in the room alone, an icy chill spreading from my heart, as in the snow over a decade ago. As I lifted my imperial nephews one by one to pick plum blossoms and was about to pick up the last child, one of the palace eunuchs said to me, "Your Highness, this is Chancellor Yun's son, not a prince."

I could no longer recall what that child had looked like, but that event had been firmly fixed in his memory.

"You broke off a plum blossom branch and gave it to me then. I ought to prostrate myself in gratitude. Thank you, Your Highness. Clearly I am the same as them."

A while later, Liu Tongyi opened the door and came in, then shut the door. "The servants are preparing a boat. Master Wan is about to leave."

He put the bundle in his hands on the table and continued, "There will be six boatmen aboard to take Master Wan to his ship."

Liu Tongyi shifted a potted tree on a shelf beside the window, and a hole opened unexpectedly in the wall, revealing a narrow passage.

"If you leave by this passage, you'll reach the place where the boatmen are gathering."

I looked at him. "And how are you planning to deal with Wang You?"

"There are always ways," said Liu Tongyi with perfect composure. "Don't worry."

I looked at him again, picked up the bundle, went to the hole, dropped the bundle into the passage, rotated the potted tree, closed the hole, and grabbed his arms. "Since there is wine on your ship, can you drink a few cups with me?"

Liu Tongyi looked at me with his brow tightly furrowed. "Your Highness Prince Huai, time is short. If you do not go now…"

"Why should I go?" I said. "I want Ransi to keep me company."

Liu Tongyi's arms went rigid. I half dragged him out the door. Wang You scurried up to the end of the passage. I pulled Liu Tongyi right past him. "Eunuch Wang, I am going to drink a few cups with Lord Liu. Why don't you rest in your room for now?"

Wang You assented behind me.

When we reached the hall, I stopped. "Oh, yes, Master Mei, where *would* it be suitable for us to drink?"

Liu Tongyi looked at me with a stiff expression, called over a servant, gave him some instructions, and said to me, "This way."

Liu Tongyi took me to a quiet, out-of-the-way little room.

The servant first brought wine, then a little later brought food. I drank cup after cup as I asked Liu Tongyi, "Why did you come here?"

There was a cup of wine in front of Liu Tongyi. No matter what I said to him, he would only take a few sips. "I just happened to be passing by."

I laughed. "You even brought Eldest Young Master Yun. How did that just happen?"

Coolly, Liu Tongyi said, "Master Wan happened to want to come, and I happened to bring him."

I laughed again and kept drinking.

Unnoticed, the sky darkened. Stumbling a little, I took a trip to the latrine. When I returned to the room, I was just about to continue when Liu Tongyi leapt to his feet, went to the wall, wrapped his arms around a vase, and twisted it. Again, a hole opened in the wall.

I looked at him, slightly aghast. "Master Mei, how many secret passages *are* there on your ship?"

Liu Tongyi once again produced a bundle. "Your Highness Prince Huai, leave now, while it's dark. Eunuch Wang is asleep, you need not worry."

I put down my cup and stared at him. "Then what will you do? When Wang You wakes up, how are you going to explain yourself?"

Still cool, Liu Tongyi said, "Please do not worry, Your Highness. Naturally, I have a means to extricate myself."

I wanted to laugh a little. The pain behind my left ribs was growing stronger, and there was a sour taste in my mouth.

I swayed to my feet and walked up to him. Liu Tongyi put the bundle into my hands. I grabbed his hands, stumbled, and inadvertently fell against him.

Liu Tongyi's body went rigid again. I whispered into his ear, "It's no use. You understand His Majesty's tactics. That day he summoned me to see him alone, he gave me a drug. My life ends tonight."

Liu Tongyi's body was warm. It gave me a feeling of calm.

I couldn't quite keep my footing. There happened to be a bed in the room, so I fell onto it with him. I couldn't see Liu Tongyi's expression now. I only said to him, "Ransi, I'm sorry. I didn't want to drag you into this again. Perhaps this is fate. Now that I'm nearing the end, you're still the one at my side."

I was very much attached to life. I didn't know why people were born, nor whether ghosts truly existed. Perhaps life was a brief bout of something, while death was an eternal nothing. No matter what, something was better than nothing. That was what I thought.

So no matter how events panned out, I exhausted all my efforts fighting to keep myself alive.

But the more I struggled, the less I could escape.

Now that it came down to it, I had no thoughts, only a blank feeling of numbness.

I said to Liu Tongyi, "Ransi, I've said it before: nothing is owed between us. You don't have to treat me like this, but thank you for doing it regardless."

Liu Tongyi's voice seemed to be very far away. "…I do not do this because of anything I might owe you, and it isn't to hear you thank me."

I closed my eyes peacefully. My whole life was worth it to hear these words.

"Liu Tongyi, if there should be…"

If there should be... I thought about it and said nothing. Forget the "ifs." They might all be false. In this instant of utter reality, it was unsuitable to speak of such things.

Supposing that what came after this was only a dreamless sleep, when daybreak came and I awoke, if I could only see him, hear him say…

Prince Huai? Your Highness? Master Zhao?

Anything at all would do.

If I could only hear, could only see, how good that would be.

Amid dense darkness, I automatically opened my eyes and saw a blurry face.

When the face came clear, it was Liu Tongyi's.

He stood by the bed holding a bowl. "You're awake?"

For an instant, I was totally numb. Then I instantly propped myself up. "Where am I?"

"Aboard ship," Liu Tongyi said calmly. "Master Zhao slept aboard this ship last night. It is now midmorning. Did you sleep well?"

When I frowned, a stabbing pain lanced through my head. Liu Tongyi passed me the bowl. I took it and drank it down in one gulp. "How did you ever find the antidote and save my life?"

Besides which, this antidote was quite pleasant, sweet, like suanmeitang flavored with osmanthus.

"This is suanmeitang, a hangover cure," said Liu Tongyi. "Master Zhao wasn't poisoned. Why would you need an antidote?"

What.

My head ached even more fiercely. I opened my mouth. Liu Tongyi passed me a handkerchief, then a letter.

I took the handkerchief and wiped my mouth. Then I took the letter.

There was writing on the envelope: *For Uncle, Private.*

It was Qizhe's handwriting.

Liu Tongyi turned away, holding the empty bowl. "Eunuch Wang left before daylight. He left me this letter to give to you."

I heard Liu Tongyi's steps recede into the distance and the door close, then I tore open the letter. There was no address, no signature, only a single sentence:

I have always trusted you, Uncle, but you have never trusted me.

Approaching noon, the sun was resplendent. It sparkled on the sea, dazzling to behold.

I found Liu Tongyi in a cool spot below deck. He was looking into the distance, I knew not at what. When I came up in front of him, he said, "Steward Wang told me to convey to Your Highness Prince Huai that he was acting under imperial orders and offended you in many particulars. He also said that blue-and-white porcelain jar was an old possession. Your Highness must have forgotten about it, but His Majesty ordered him to give it to Your Highness as a keepsake. He has left that little jar in his room."

I said nothing.

After a brief silence, Liu Tongyi turned his head and looked at me. "I wonder what plans Master Zhao has going forward?"

I looked at him. "What plans does Master Mei hope I will make?"

Liu Tongyi paused. "I hardly have room to speak on the matter, but… if Master Zhao still wishes to go to Java, I know where you can get a reliable ship."

I thought about it, then said, smiling, "Concerning that… there is no need for Master Mei to go out of your way. I have become accustomed to drifting. All this is familiar to me. While the weather is good, I will bid you farewell."

I packed up the clothes and luggage Wang You had left for me, as well as the little jar. With the bag over my shoulder, I left the hold.

Behind me, Liu Tongyi said, "Master Zhao."

I looked back. He said, "It's noon already. Why not eat before you go?"

I smiled and said, "I don't think so. A noontime meal might last into the evening, and that would be another day's delay."

When I was again about to leave, Liu Tongyi again said, "Master Zhao."

I looked back at him again. His lips moved. Finally, all he said was, "Take care."

"Take care, Master Mei," I said. "The world is wide. We may meet again."

I went down the gangplank and came ashore. I walked on awhile, then turned back to look at the ship. There seemed to be a person at the fore, but the sun was too bright, and I couldn't see clearly. Perhaps there was no one.

I turned. People came and went around me. The road ahead was long.

Chapter Twelve

I grabbed a handful of dried red flowers from the bag and rubbed them between my fingers.

"I think there's something wrong with your product."

The middle-aged man glared at me, stiff-necked. "How did you even get involved in this? Don't mess up my sale! These really are top-quality tobacco flowers from the Kingdom of Mohe, for the king's exclusive use. I don't suppose you'd ever have seen anything this good."

"I've seen plenty of tobacco flowers, but the largest dried flowers are still only the size of a pea. Yours are all as big as chrysanthemums. Maybe they're just wildflowers growing at your village gate."

Even the man's neck turned purple. "Total nonsense! They're expensive precisely because they're big! Only the best quality ones are this big!"

I put down the flowers and gave him my earnest advice: "Next time you want to cheat someone, remember to do a little more research. As everyone knows, tobacco flowers are more expensive the smaller they get. The ones that look like rice flour are the highest quality. You have it backward."

The man's eyes became two protuberant pigeon's eggs. He was dragged off to see the authorities by some burly men.

Then I dusted off my hands and turned to the person who had been standing off to the side with his hands behind his back during this exchange. I smiled and said, "Master Mei, what a coincidence."

Liu Tongyi gave me a faint smile. The steward behind him said, "Master Zhao, it *is* a coincidence. This is the third time this month. Each time our general manager goes out to purchase goods, we run into you."

"Then it must be fate," I said. "When you leave the pier, there's a good restaurant at the corner. Shall we drink a cup of wine together?"

"Master Zhao helped us recognize a fake product," said Liu Tongyi. "I should be treating you. Only, isn't Master Zhao doing business in Java? How come we met you the time before last picking up goods in Dongying? And how come we met you last time picking up goods in Goryeo? And now that we've come to the desert on

business, we meet you again."

I waved a hand and said, "Well, I haven't had much to do. Perhaps you know, Master Mei, that Java is a little place, like a pellet. Nothing there but coconut palms. If you want to experience the virtues of spring flowers and fall fruits, you have to venture out into the wide world."

Liu Tongyi inclined his head slightly, but there was a smile tucked into the corners of his lips. "That's true."

"You say this is a monkey skull?" I picked up the bowl and weighed it. The edges were inlaid with gleaming brass, and a piece of jade hung from it. That made it pretty heavy.

The old fellow gasped and extended a trembling hand. "Sir, be careful. Don't break it. That's an old monkey king's skull. Do you see those six places?" He pointed to the places with inlaid jade flowers and copper plates. "That is where the monkey king's six ear holes are located. An exceptional six-eared macaque. It took ten great shamans to bring him down. Look here at these talismans! Any lesser personage than Master Mei couldn't appreciate it. I've already decided to sell it to Master Mei. I'm very sorry, sir."

I opened my eyes wide. "What a truly expensive object. Ten shamans trekked all the way from the desert to the south sea to make this old coconut. The travel expenses alone must have been considerable."

The old fellow was aghast. "Don't talk nonsense, sir! What coconut! This is the skull of an exceptional six-eared macaque monkey king."

Smiling, I said, "But this monkey king must be very old to have the grain of a coconut shell on his bones."

When I scraped off the skin of paint with a knife, the object's true nature was instantly evident.

The old fellow left in a cloud of mournful sighs, clutching the coconut. Liu Tongyi smiled at me. "Master Zhao is a true expert."

"Naturally, I'm an expert when it comes to coconuts. They're everywhere in Java. You can't avoid becoming an expert. But Master Mei, I recall that you're very skilled in discerning these things. How did you come to nearly fall for it?"

"I am only skilled when it comes to antiques," said Liu Tongyi. "I haven't seen many coconuts."

True enough. I grabbed him by the arm. "In all this time, I've eaten so many meals at your expense. Yuanzhou lies to the south. It's my turn to pay."

Liu Tongyi smiled again and let me take him toward a restaurant. “All right.”

The rain was coming down in buckets. I opened an umbrella on the veranda. A gust of wind blew in slantwise and nearly sent me reeling.

The inn’s attendant said, “Sir, you can’t go out in this weather. Rest awhile in your room. I hear several ships on the river capsized between last night and today.”

I looked up. When the wind dropped slightly, I charged into the rain all the same.

I had received word that Ruihe’s people had arrived in the city the day before yesterday, but when I’d arrived, the inn they were staying at was already full. If I didn’t go today and waited until the rain stopped, they might be gone by tomorrow. Besides, it was pouring, and it was midday. They were sure to be eating in the main hall. It would be more natural for me to go inside to get out of the rain.

I hadn’t gone two steps when a wild gust of wind blew my umbrella away. I turned back to the inn and borrowed a raincoat and bamboo hat from the attendant, then staggered onward. Up ahead, at a corner leading to the pier, I caught sight of someone standing in the wind and rain, unmoving, looking as if he were on the verge of being bent in half by the wind. The two people beside him were desperately trying to drag him away.

The more I looked, the more familiar he became. When I was right in front of him, I blurted out, “Ran…”

He looked back abruptly, and I tipped up the bamboo hat. “Master Mei.”

I had never seen Liu Tongyi in such a wretched state. His hair and clothes were plastered to his skin as if he were a water ghoul.

I moved my lips, trying to smile, but for some reason, I couldn’t manage it. I only said, a little stiffly, “Master Mei… What a coincidence… We meet again.”

Liu Tongyi stared fixedly at me, but he was smiling. “Yes, such a coincidence. We meet again.”

I put the bamboo hat on Liu Tongyi’s head and pulled him back to the inn, where I immediately put him in a hot bath and prepared ginger tea. But Liu Tongyi still became feverish at once. For two days straight, he threw up anything he ate. His stewards and servants did nothing but cry. The old steward clung to me and said, “The old master died of lung disease. If the young master also… What will we do, whatever will we do…”

All the servants sobbed. I threw them out.

Late at night, I wrung out a cool handkerchief and put it back on Liu Tongyi's head. I said to him that actually, we hadn't met by coincidence those times.

I had gone to Java, stayed there for a month. Looking at the coconuts and the trees full of monkeys, I had felt an unbearable emptiness.

I felt I had no place to settle.

At my age, all prior entanglements, whether true or counterfeit, were as transient as clouds. But there was one person who, when I had nothing to my name, I could trust, could rely on, who made me feel at peace, who kept me company; only that was real.

That person could only be Liu Tongyi.

Whether he was Chancellor Liu at court, Mei Yong managing Ruihe, or the owner of that little house in Qincai Alley.

I tucked Liu Tongyi's hand under the covers. "So you have to be all right, or else when I really am about to die, who will I have to depend on?"

I was just about to get up to check on the medicine pot when I heard a weak voice.

"Don't come to me again… You've scared me three times… I've had enough…"

I wiped my nose and drank the cold medicine, then heard two knocks on the door. Liu Tongyi's steward scurried in and said, "Master Zhao, our general manager can move around now. He'd like to invite Master Zhao to have lunch with him."

Lunch was very plain, because I still had a cold, and Liu Tongyi had only just recovered from his illness. Apart from a dish of milk-white fish soup, the table was covered in greens and root vegetables.

We couldn't even have rice wine.

After this uninspiring meal, I was really in no mood for tea.

With nothing to sweeten the palate, I tasted only bland bitterness.

I put a hand over my teacup and said to Liu Tongyi, "Oh, yes, Master Mei, there's something I'd like to ask your help with."

Liu Tongyi stopped in the process of pouring tea. "Please go ahead, Master Zhao."

"It's like this," I said. "A little while ago, I lost some money on a deal, so…"

Liu Tongyi put down the teapot and looked at me. I continued, "I'm not asking to borrow money. I wanted to ask… does Ruihe have an opening? For an assistant manager, or a steward, or something. Your business keeps getting bigger. There's a lot to do, you'll need some more people to help out. Anyway…"

Liu Tongyi kept looking at me. I met his gaze and smiled. "Ransi, how much longer are you and I going to keep going in circles like this?"

Liu Tongyi smiled too. "I don't want to circle anymore. You're the one who keeps circling."

Ten years later, the fifth month came again, and Ransi and I went to sea to purchase goods. We returned in autumn. As soon as we came home, Steward Li informed us that an urgent dispatch had arrived from the capital. It had been waiting at the house for half a month and was addressed to me by full name.

Since coming ashore, Ransi and I had seen some strange indications along the way, and heard some remarks. As soon as I saw that envelope, my heart went cold.

It was Qitan's handwriting.

I hastily tore open the letter. Only a few words were written there, but they turned my limbs to ice:

Uncle, His Majesty is gravely ill. He wants to see you.

I raced the whole way on horseback. As I arrived outside the capital, I saw the city guard dressed in indigo and raising mourning streamers.

My vision went black, and I knew nothing more.

Fine autumn rain fell, soaking the earth. The leaves among the mountains were a striking field of red.

I dug the soil and buried that little blue-and-white porcelain jar beside the tablet, which was inscribed: *Tablet of Sagacious Benevolence and Divine Merit for Great Yong's Emperor Dezong.*

I only remembered that my nephew Qizhe had been no eternal majesty, and he hadn't been called Dezong. He had just been a somewhat shy, awkward child.

For those born into the imperial family, there were many rules. You could not play very much nor eat very much for the sake of propriety and dignity, so a child of ten would never even have seen Laba garlic.[16]

At the time, it had been the last month of the year, and whatever the empress dowager might have been thinking, she had sent the crown prince to Huai Manor. Naturally, Qitan, Qifei, and the other natural disasters were there as well; it was yet another day of great unrest in our household.

I snatched a moment's peace to sit in a little hall. My mother happened to tell me then that the kitchen had just finished making fresh Laba garlic, and I had some brought to me. I was just about to sample it when the crown prince, who had just

entered the room, shouted, “Stop!”

He swept his sleeve over the table, and the small dish containing the garlic crashed to the ground and shattered.

The servants in the hall were all scared right to their knees. Qizhe looked up at me and said sternly, “This garlic has turned green and must be rank with poison. Why would you still eat it?”

I stared at him, then laughed. The servants in the hall, as well as my mother, who had come running at the noise, also laughed. “The crown prince hasn’t eaten Laba garlic before. It’s only during the last month of the year, around the Laba Festival, that this kind of garlic can be pickled.”

I had more brought and ate it then and there to show him.

A maid said, smiling, “The crown prince’s health is precious, so naturally he hasn’t seen a common food like this.”

A rare flush appeared on Qizhe’s face. Looking stern, he said, “I do not often eat things in the nature of chives and garlic.”

Presumably there was a concern that they would cause bad breath or flatulence, which would be indecorous.

I ate a clove and saw Qizhe constantly staring at the dish. Since there was a rule against it, I did not dare give the crown prince Laba garlic to eat, so I asked for it to be carried away.

But when the maid bent to pick it up, Qizhe said, “Hold.”

The maid drew back her hands. Qizhe walked over to the table. With a solemn expression, he said methodically, “I must know more about the ways of the common people in order to experience how they live.” He snatched up a clove of Laba garlic and solemnly put it in his mouth.

After that, at dinner, the princes ate half a dish of Laba garlic with their porridge, and Qizhe in particular ate a great deal, sending me and my mother into agonies lest he pickle himself.

Finally, I had a container of Laba garlic brought out and some of its contents packed into a small blue-and-white porcelain jar, which I sent back with Qizhe to the palace, so the crown prince could further experience the life of the common people. That, at last, was the end of it.

I patted the earth down firmly and stood. Qitan said quietly, “Uncle, you cannot stay here long. As long as you keep him in your heart, the late emperor in heaven is sure to know.”

I turned. I seemed to hear someone behind me call out, "Chengjun."

I looked back. In this place where the bones of the imperial family were buried, where would that first person to call my courtesy name come from?

When we left the imperial tombs, I saw from the corner of my eye a figure standing by the rock face along the road. He smiled at me, his expression profoundly relaxed, then vanished into the rock face.

Autumn rain streamed down. The red foliage was gorgeous. It was almost as if he had never been there.

I let down the curtain, and the carriage moved smoothly forward. We returned to Dai Manor. The next day, when the rain had stopped, I made ready to go home.

Ransi was at home waiting for me.

Qitan wanted me to stay a few days more. I said, "Our business is flourishing, and it's too much for Ransi to handle on his own. I must hurry back."

"You only say that because you don't want to stay, Uncle," said Qitan. "I'm not extorting you anymore, so why are you in such a hurry to run off?"

"Is that any way for a prince regent to talk?" I said.

Smiling, Qitan said, "In front of you, I'll forever be young."

A passel of children played in the garden outside. Qitan had told me earlier that some were his, and some belonged to Qifei and the rest. Because there were many antiques at Dai Manor, and the furnishings were new and exquisite, they all liked coming here to play.

On the veranda beside the garden, I saw a few palace eunuchs standing with a youth. The child's immature face looked familiar to me. I couldn't help looking at him again. Qitan laughed. "That's one of so-and-so's, the same as the rest of them. Just the same."

I smiled.

Qitan sighed. "When I look at them, I remember when I was little, playing at Huai Manor… Things were better when we were little, with nothing on our minds."

Yes, it was better when they were little, innocent and artless. Whatever the adults had taught them, whatever they had learned, they still had the simplicity of childhood.

For example, that time decades ago, when I had held them up so they could pick plum blossoms.

I only understood later, when my mother told me, that all the princes had gathered at Huai Manor that day because my father had just died, and the various

factions wanted to find out where I stood.

That day, I picked up each of the princes one by one, so at first they could find out nothing. But later, because of the spilled cup of tea, I had held Qizhe longest, and therefore, Huai Manor had joined the crown prince's faction.

It would not do to dwell on this. Decades had passed. Many people and things were now gone. Looking back, it was just some kids coming to their uncle's house to play.

A servant ducked inside and whispered something into Qitan's ear.

Qitan said to me that he had to take care of something. He would be back in a moment. He stood and left.

I went to the veranda and slowly strolled, watching the children play. Suddenly, I heard a sound from the small hall next to me.

I glanced inside and saw Qitan bow and say, "…I must go see to my guest. I will return soon."

Seated at the head of the room was the boy I had seen standing on the veranda earlier. His clear, childish eyes were watching Qitan. With a show of sophistication, he inclined his head.

"Then we will await you here, Imperial Uncle."

【THE END】

Extra Painting of a Willow

I.

I hung in midair, watching the sorrowful underground scene with a heart full of anticipation, exhilarated.

After many years in the imperial prison, at last this day had come; a chance to inhabit a body had appeared before me.

I was a ghost, a spirit of the injured dead. As to how many years I had been here, I could not be bothered to count and no longer knew.

Long ago, like the man below me now, I had been locked up in this cell. Grave was the wrong I had suffered, and hard I took it. With my belt, I hanged myself from a rafter, thus perishing and becoming a hanged ghost.

Only after becoming a ghost did I learn that the legends were true: the underworld will not accept the ghost of one who has committed suicide, especially by hanging.

I could only keep my watch here and await the arrival of another hanged ghost; only then would I be able to reincarnate.

However, after I became a ghost, the ceiling of the prison cell was boarded up, sealing off the rafters. No nails were left in the walls. Even if you wanted to hang yourself, you couldn't find a place for the rope. In the other cells, ghosts came and went. I remained, year in and year out.

I was indignant. Living had been hard going, and now being a ghost was hard going as well. Heaven wished to keep me in this cell for all eternity, so I would defy heaven. Without a hanged ghost to take my place, I could not reincarnate, so I would simply find myself a dead man and inhabit his body.

I had committed suicide and could only inhabit those who had done the same, and few merited being shut up in this cell. During my arduous wait, a few came, none willing to take the short-sighted approach. They waited obstinately to be killed

or released.

At last, after years unnumbered, *he* was locked up.

I could tell that he would not be killed and might very soon be released. But given the circumstances that had brought him here, it was no easy task for him to make his peace.

It was simply fate that had brought him to me to inhabit.

With a smile, I watched him swallow the pill, and waited patiently.

Now, on the ground, he was bleating on, delivering his last wishes, and that man named Liu Tongyi was deathly pale, despair in his eyes.

Everyone is like this. They cannot see their own hearts, and they cannot interpret others' thoughts.

It was clear at a glance that Liu Tongyi loved him. Unfortunately, *he* looked without seeing and only went on groaning for his own satisfaction.

Looking at Liu Tongyi's expression, I felt a sudden trace of envy. Had there been someone to look at me like that back then, my death would have been worth it. No, rather, I wouldn't have killed myself under any provocation.

I descended.

He spat out a few feeble syllables: "Ran… Ransi…" The hand clutching Liu Tongyi's jade-green sleeve slackened bit by bit. I was just about to take aim and drop when he took another rattling breath, grasped Liu Tongyi's sleeve again, and spoke a rather exhaustive sentence.

"As I am, I can hardly be buried… without causing trouble… so let me be burned… and scatter the ashes by some mountain or river… and everything will be clean."

You have got to be kidding.

Your last wish is to be cremated? You won't even let your death benefit someone? How stingy!

And how naive. What say will you have in it once you're dead?

Watching his grip loosen, his head fall askew and come to rest against Liu Tongyi's shoulder, I settled.

The body became mine without a hitch.

There was quiet all around. The body leaning close against mine was rigid, as if it too had become a corpse. I squeezed an edge of cool, slippery fabric and half-opened my eyes. "Ransi."

Liu Tongyi shuddered. I drew close to his cheek and lowered my voice to its quietest. "Ransi, that was an act just now. I'm playing dead. Please help me. I want to escape."

Liu Tongyi's body stiffened once more.

Urgent footsteps came from nearby, accompanied by a cacophony of voices. I closed my eyes again and laid my head back down on Liu Tongyi's shoulder.

I felt Liu Tongyi release me, slowly, ever so slowly, and stand.

A brief pause, and his voice, without any emotion, placid, said, "His Highness Prince Huai has taken poison and killed himself."

Just then, I suddenly became aware of something.

The cell did not contain the aura of another ghost. Where was Jing Weiyi's soul?

In a certain corner of the body, something stirred slightly, then sank into silence once more. It was as if a bolt of lightning had struck the top of my head.

It was… Jing Weiyi's soul.

He was alive! He was actually alive! He had actually been playing dead all along!

I had entered the body of a living man!

This…

Was this fate?

II.

A hand palpated what was currently mine and also Jing Weiyi's neck, peeled open an eyelid currently shared between him and me, checked our shared pulse, felt our shared chest.

"Your Majesty, I beg leave to report, His Highness Prince Huai has passed away."

The voice that followed was resonant, wrathful.

"Examine him again! Prince Huai couldn't have killed himself! He must be pretending!"

While the present emperor was young, he was a wise ruler. He had hit the mark.

So, there was another round of fumbling, followed by the *thud-thud* of kowtowing.

"Your Majesty… His Highness Prince Huai… has truly passed away…"

"Passed away?" said the emperor's voice with a cold laugh. "Our own august personage would pass away sooner than him!"

Footsteps came up beside me and stilled. "Imperial Uncle, we know you are faking. Get up, and we will give you a full pardon."

He was in a heavy sleep and wouldn't wake for a day or two. I, meanwhile, could have gotten up, but all I wanted to know was how to leave this body.

With silence all around, I heard Liu Tongyi say, "Your Majesty, the imperial physician has completed his examination. His Highness Prince Huai has indeed perished by his own hand."

There was still a sneer in the emperor's voice. "What makes Official Liu so certain? Our imperial uncle has always been crafty. We do not believe he would die so willingly. Feigning death to escape imprisonment is much more his style!"

I could not help wondering how irresponsible Jing Weiyi must have been in life that no one would even believe in his suicide.

His death was indeed a sham, but when I heard the emperor's remark, my heart still chilled on his behalf.

"Your Majesty," Liu Tongyi said, his tone still mild, "before his death, His Highness Prince Huai conveyed to me his last wishes. Taking into account the severity of his guilt, he did not wish to be interred and instructed me to ask Your Majesty on his behalf to have his remains cremated and the ashes scattered to the four corners of the earth, by mountain or river."

Silence fell once more in the cell.

A long moment passed. "In what light does Official Liu view our imperial uncle's statement?" said the emperor.

Liu Tongyi said, "It is my belief that His Highness Prince Huai, knowing that Your Majesty would be sure to doubt the authenticity of his suicide, must have chosen this means to set Your Majesty's mind at rest."

"From what Official Liu says," said the emperor, "our imperial uncle understood us well and was solicitous of us."

"His Highness Prince Huai was, after all, Your Majesty's uncle," said Liu Tongyi.

The emperor paced a few steps at my side. "Official Liu, your speech at present is somewhat dissimilar to what it is ordinarily."

There was a thread of weariness in Liu Tongyi's voice. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. At present I no longer know how to act for the best. I request to withdraw and look for Your Majesty's consent."

Yet again, there was a moment of silence in the cell. The emperor permitted Liu Tongyi to withdraw.

When the sound of Liu Tongyi's footsteps reached the cell door, the emperor suddenly spoke again. "Official Liu, do you think as we do that our imperial uncle's death is not genuine?"

Liu Tongyi did not answer.

The emperor went on: "Oh, no, when Official Liu told us of our imperial uncle's last wishes, it was intended as a reproach. Official Liu believes that our imperial uncle is dead."

"I would not dare to reproach Your Majesty," Liu Tongyi said calmly.

"We have treated Jing Weiyi with all that humanity and duty could ask of us," said the emperor. "He plotted rebellion in secret, and still we agreed to spare his life, and sent Yun Yu to bring him two paths from which to choose. What else had we to say to him?"

"I only think," said Liu Tongyi, "that when the investigation had not yet assembled all the evidence, it was slightly precipitate of Your Majesty to send Supervisor Yun to bring Prince Huai a finalized outcome. I advised against it at the time, but Your Majesty did not accept my counsel."

The emperor's voice rose steeply in volume. "What remained to be investigated? Jing Weiyi's own conduct in recent years, was that because we entrapped him? Because Yun Yu entrapped him? Or because Prince Zong entrapped him? He confessed, and it was you who took his confession, Official Liu!"

"I thought that, even though Prince Huai had confessed, corresponding proof for each point still needed to be found before a final decision could be made in this case," said Liu Tongyi.

"There indeed Official Liu speaks in the style of the Court of Judicial Review," said the emperor. "Not a stone left unturned. Tell us, then, if the law were strictly followed, what punishment would Jing Weiyi's crime merit? When we spared his life, were we not bending the law in his favor?"

"Therefore," said Liu Tongyi, "I believe that His Highness Prince Huai's suicide is perhaps the best course. Your Majesty, please be magnanimous. I will take my leave."

Liu Tongyi's measured footsteps grew distant. Again, the prison was quiet.

I had not mistaken my man. Liu Tongyi was truly impressive. With this rebuff, the emperor would for the moment have no more doubts about Jing Weiyi's death, and my escape would be easier.

A long time passed before some unknown official unafraid of dying asked the emperor for instructions for dealing with Prince Huai's remains.

The emperor then ordered the remains to be temporarily removed to "that place."

I felt a mat placed beneath me and a cloth laid atop me. My head and feet were lifted, and I was moved onto a litter.

Many years ago, I had watched from midair as my remains were carried out like this.

I had been better off then than Jing Weiyi. At least my corpse was cushioned on a soft padded mattress. Perhaps this was because it had been deep autumn then, and now it was summer.

But at the time, I had only been able to watch as my corpse was carried away, while my soul could not pass beyond the prison door.

This time, inside Jing Weiyi's body, I was effortlessly carried out and at last broke free of my cage.

"That place" was quite distant from the imperial prison. With Jing Weiyi's body, I went outside and boarded a carriage, traveled for a long time, then left the carriage and passed over a number of thresholds before finally coming to rest.

A court eunuch said, "Prince Huai committed suicide in the imperial prison for fear of punishment. His Majesty has been gracious and permitted his remains to rest at his residence. Tomorrow, when the body has been washed and dressed, it will be taken to Pufang Temple to await cremation."

Oh, so the body had been taken back to Jing Weiyi's manor.

Jing Weiyi had unsuccessfully attempted to rebel and committed suicide for fear of punishment. Most of the servants in his manor had scattered. The paltry few remaining did not dare to cry openly, only to give a few furtive whimpers beside the body.

Only one comparatively courageous man kowtowed several times, *thud-thud*, and spilled a cup of wine in libation. Crying, he said, "Your Highness, Han Si does not know what crime you have committed. Han Si only knows you were a good master. Your goodness to me will be eternally remembered. Every day I live is a day I will make offerings to Your Highness's memorial tablet. I will never forget the kindness of the old prince, the old princess, and Your Highness toward me."

In this cold and barren world, a loyal servant like this was a true rarity.

When he was through crying, he was thrown out by the guards.

Perhaps the emperor still had doubts about Jing Weiyi's death. He had sent a number of guards and a court eunuch to keep watch over the body.

The guards brought over a brazier, in which they lit incense and burned funeral goods. Whispering, they said again and again, "Your Highness Prince Huai, you were

a man of lofty aspirations, but sadly you were not fated to succeed in your great undertaking. We are but humble nonentities. Go on your way with an unburdened heart, and do not cling to this world…"

I liked the smell of the incense, and a whiff of it restored my strength. Sadly, I could not move as I liked after possessing this body; I couldn't help feeling a little glum.

I wished to exercise a small bit of magic. I pulled together a chill wind, which scared the eunuch and the guards so much that they scrambled to the floor to kowtow ceaselessly. Unfortunately, I could not open my eyes in public view, but just listening to the sounds brought me pleasure, a minor distraction while I temporarily lay stiff as a board, bored stiff.

As the eunuch and the guards kept kowtowing so hard their teeth clacked together and falling over themselves trembling, I heard approaching footsteps. Then Liu Tongyi's clear and sonorous voice said, "Whence comes this alarm?"

In shaking voices, the eunuch and the guards said, "I-Imperial Chancellor Liu, you've come just in time… His Highness Prince Huai, h-he died with a grievance, and just now… there was a chill wind… all the funeral money flew up…"

Liu Tongyi said, "The door of this hall opens south. There is nothing wonderful in a breeze blowing into the hall in summer."

The sounds of the eunuch's and the guards' teeth chattering continued.

Liu Tongyi added, "I had a sudden sense that there was a suspicious aspect to His Highness Prince Huai's death and therefore came to investigate. Please step aside to supervise."

The eunuch and the guards said at once that if Imperial Chancellor Liu thought there was cause for suspicion, of course he ought to investigate. His Highness Prince Huai had been a prince after all. Their presence during the inspection would be inappropriate. They ought to stand watch outside instead.

They filed out.

I heard the door close. The only sound was of Liu Tongyi's footsteps gradually approaching. He alone remained in the hall.

I opened my eyes and sat up.

At first, Liu Tongyi seemed to be startled. Then he calmed.

He had changed into his robe of office, a solemn dark blue, intensely official-looking, less warm and human than the casual clothing he had worn before.

I tugged on his sleeve. In an adoring voice, I whispered, "Ransi, thank you."

With a solemn bearing, he said quietly, "No need. I only wanted to know what Your Highness wishes to do, and to know the circumstances. There must be some story behind Prince Zong's words before he fell unconscious and the way Your Highness's confession was delivered. I would not be overindulgent, nor would I be unjust…"

I was a little amused. Was he saying this for Jing Weiyi's benefit, or his own?

He could not prove that Jing Weiyi had been unjustly accused, yet he was helping him fake his death. This was not the conduct of an honest official.

Clearly, he was not so honorable, yet he insisted on pretending to be. Why do that to himself?

It was Jing Weiyi's labored dying words that had provoked him, making him agree so readily to help. I couldn't let him calm down now. If his false honor took the upper hand before I succeeded in taking over Jing Weiyi's body, and I became a gallows ghost with him, it would be a miserable failure.

So I gazed at him lovingly, lovingly clutched his sleeve, called in a soft, loving voice, "Ransi, I have put my life in your hands. It is up to you to decide whether I live or die. I will have no regrets."

In the tranquil hall, we gazed at each other.

Before Liu Tongyi could speak again, I took aim at his lips and kissed him fiercely.

Liu Tongyi's body stiffened. He didn't resist; he was very yielding. A long time later, I released him. His eyes were clear, but I couldn't see through them.

Softly, he said, "Your Highness has no heartbeat. The imperial physician checked and found no pulse. Whether sleeping or waking, there is no flaw in your performance. Why?"

Affectionately, I said, "I'll tell you when I get out."

"Does Your Highness plan to leave from the manor?" Liu Tongyi said.

"How could I?" I said.

The emperor's order to let Jing Weiyi's corpse rest in the manor was clearly an attempt to reveal any subterfuge. Therefore, in the manor, I could take no action; my performance must be authentic.

"Pufang Temple," I said.

Liu Tongyi said nothing more. This was no time for conversation. I was just about to return to acting like a corpse when Liu Tongyi said blandly, "Supervisor Yun will come soon to see Your Highness."

Supervisor Yun? Who was that?

With a slight effort of thought, I recalled that this was the person who had brought Jing Weiyi two paths to choose from.

His name was Yun Yu. At the last, Jing Weiyi had called him Suiya.

This person held profound significance for Jing Weiyi. When I touched on this name in my mind, Jing Weiyi's soul, fast asleep in some recess, stirred.

I closed my eyes and lay down.

Liu Tongyi, Yun Yu. Fascinating.

Once Liu Tongyi was gone, I languished in boredom. I slept within Jing Weiyi's body, and as I lay fuddled with sleep, I heard someone call out, "Supervisor Yun."

I pricked up my ears and listened carefully. Footsteps approached, not fast and not slow either; they seemed to be made by cloth shoes, not an official's boots.

The sound slowed as it drew near. At last it arrived beside me.

After a pause, the cloth covering Jing Weiyi's face was suddenly lifted away.

After that, there wasn't a trace of sound. That person stood beside me, completely motionless, even the sound of his breathing inaudible. I could almost have believed that this Supervisor Yun was like me, a ghost.

For better or worse, there had been something between him and Jing Weiyi in life. Now his remains lay before him; whether true or false, a couple of sighs, a few words of lamentation must surely be called for.

Sadly, this Supervisor Yun was as unmoved as a mountain, disappointing my ardent hopes.

After I knew not how much time had passed, there came the sound of another person stepping into the room.

Then I heard a voice say, "A-Yu."

Beside me, Supervisor Yun stirred at last. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

The emperor came close. "A-Yu, we heard that you were unwell. Why come here?"

Supervisor Yun did not answer. The emperor said, "You can stop looking, it really is him. The physician and Liu Tongyi personally examined him."

Supervisor Yun remained silent. The emperor continued, "When he died, he deliberately called for Liu Tongyi to be with him. Deliberately had Liu Tongyi tell us to cremate him and scatter his ashes anywhere at all. We think that if he has now reached the kingdom of the underworld, he must hate us profoundly. Will he also hate you?"

Supervisor Yun spoke at last. In a most commonplace voice, he said, "Yesterday he said to me that we would speak again another time. I thought that I was humoring him, so I agreed. I did not realize that he was also humoring me."

He replaced the cloth over Jing Weiyi's face and quietly said, "I never thought you would keep the genuine article for yourself."

He turned to leave. "Your Majesty, when will the body be washed?"

"In half a shichen," said the emperor.

"I will leave once the body has been washed," said Yun Yu.

The washing of the body was a total shambles.

The so-called washing itself consisted of having my head and feet lifted by a few eunuchs and being plunged into a big tub of water. During this process, a passel of priests, monks, and nuns chanted incantations, rang bells, and struck chime stones, and recited all manner of scriptures to release a person from karmic sin, droning on and on. The Buddhists and the Daoists were mixed together; whether they counteracted each other I don't know, but at any rate, they had no effect on me.

When the scriptures had been recited, I was fished up from the tub of water. The wet clothes were stripped, the body was wiped clean. This represented being cleansed from karmic sin, and the scriptures being recited changed from those of release from karmic sin to incantations of reincarnation, but there wasn't a single affected sob.

Still later, the time came to dress the body. As soon as a pair of underpants were put on to cover its nakedness, the emperor's voice said, "We will dress Prince Huai."

A sudden hush fell over the hall. Even the ringing of the bells and the recitation of the scriptures halted. The emperor said, "Prince Huai had no children. The work of dressing him ought to be taken on by his nephews. After all, he was our imperial uncle. His attempt to usurp our throne was unsuccessful, and now that he is dead, if we dress him, it ought to be a consolation to him."

Before he could finish, the sounds of people kneeling and touching their heads to the ground started up. Everyone counseled him in no uncertain terms against this course of action. After all, Prince Huai had committed a crime; this would be insupportable. His Majesty's mercy and magnanimity shone as a beacon through untold ages, but if he followed through with his intentions, His Highness Prince Huai would remain in the kingdom of the underworld eternally, unable to reincarnate.

I heard muffled snickering. The emperor was only doing this for show, and his subjects were well aware of it. To expect of them to counsel him in all seriousness with reverence and awe in this unctuous mutual playacting was truly the utmost trial. Between the so-called art of the emperor and way of the subject, when all's said and done, the only question is which side can exceed the other in hypocrisy.

With his ministers thus counseling him, the emperor persisted, and had even snatched up Jing Weiyi's arm and was ready to insert it into a sleeve when someone rushed forward to dissuade him. At this point, Liu Tongyi put in his timely piece: "Prince Huai did commit a crime, and Your Majesty is the ruler, while Prince Huai is a subject. For Your Majesty to dress Prince Huai would truly be inappropriate. Permit these princes to take on the task."

Once he said this, a number of voices offered their services, all very young. It turned out that Jing Weiyi had numerous nephews.

One came forward directly and knelt. "Your Majesty, please condescend to allow your subject brother to take on this task and dress our imperial uncle." The voice was tearful and sounded quite sincere.

At last, the emperor said, "Very well. Prince Dai, you will do it."

Prince Dai dressed Jing Weiyi in an inner robe and outer jacket. His breathing grew strained. He seemed to be sobbing.

Beside him, a eunuch offered consolation: "Your Highness Prince Dai, please restrain your grief and accept the inevitability of loss. While His Highness Prince Huai committed an offense of unpardonable gravity, he has already passed on, his soul returned to the underworld. When he has been freed of all karmic sin, he will have the chance to live honorably in the next life."

Choked with emotion, Prince Dai said, "Imperial Uncle… go… go in peace… In a few days I am heading to Henan… and won't be able to come see you often… I will burn funeral money for you… May you be well… in the underworld… If you lack anything… come to me in a dream…"

A few teardrops fell on Jing Weiyi's face. At last, someone to cry for Jing Weiyi during his death. Even as a ghost, he would not be meanly treated. Not like me; in all these years, I had not received a single piece of funeral money.

After putting on the outer robe and before withdrawing, Prince Dai put something in Jing Weiyi's mouth. I thought it was a piece of jade. A chill spread from it, instantly invigorating my yin energy.

When the socks and shoes had been put on, the hair bound and crowned, and I was carried back to the platform, the cloth beneath me had been changed to satin,

and a pillow had been placed beneath my head, probably one made of jade.

The recital of scripture once again rang through the hall in chorus. A woman's voice said, "Your Highness Prince Huai, may you be freed from your karmic obstructions, and if you reenter the cycle of reincarnation, may you be a good person in your next life. In this life, our karmic connection has run its course, and we neither of us owe each other any further debt. Beginning today, I will humbly offer a beacon for you before the Buddha and chant scriptures every night that you may soon be freed from the cycle of reincarnation and find ultimate paradise."

I had thought that Jing Weiyi was a cutsleeve. This entanglement with a nun was a surprise to me; I had truly underrated him.

When this woman finished her prayer, the voices of a group of nuns chanting scripture erupted.

Amid the noise, I heard Liu Tongyi say, "Your Majesty, I am slightly indisposed. I will withdraw and hope you may graciously permit it."

The emperor said, "Permitted," and Liu Tongyi gratefully withdrew. Before leaving, he added, "Supervisor Yun, would you like to withdraw with me?"

In a voice of utmost calm, Yun Yu said, "I will go when I have finished watching. Thank you, Chancellor Liu."

III.

The ceremony of washing the body clamored on for a long time, then finally came to an end. Even I felt exhausted from listening to it. As I drowsed, a cloth was once again put over me, and I was carried to a carriage, which set off for a temple called Pufang.

This place was extremely quiet. Inside Jing Weiyi's body, I was carried into a big hall. More time passed. I was tasting the chill of the jade in my mouth and recovering my strength when the whispering guards around me all fell silent. The door closed and latched with a click. Someone rustled over, pinched Jing Weiyi's nostrils, and quietly called in his ear, "Your Highness… Your Highness…"

I did not move.

My wrist was lifted and palpated. Another voice, extremely low, said, "Strange. There's no pulse."

The voice that had called "Your Highness" whispered, "Reasonably speaking, His Highness ought to wake now. Was the dose wrong?"

I perceived Jing Weiyi's aura within the body and found that he was still deeply sleeping. The yin energy I had absorbed from the jade must have suppressed him, so he could not move.

Just then, an object was inserted into my nostrils and puffed smoke into them. In a moment of carelessness, I couldn't resist sneezing.

Instantly, a voice cried out, "Thank heaven, he's awake."

At this stage, I had no choice but to open my eyes. It was already dark out, and the hall was profoundly shadowed. I had only a vague impression of two masked figures beside me.

"Your Highness, your subordinates were late. I'm glad you're all right."

As expected, Jing Weiyi's escape plan was comprehensive. These two must have been servants from his manor who had arranged in advance to come to the rescue. They discussed the escape with me in whispers. Tomorrow morning, there would be another examination of the corpse, followed by cremation. The substitute corpse had been prepared, and the fraud would be perpetrated then.

One of them, named Zhang Xiao, said, "But the place in Xinan has already been found by His Majesty's men. When we get out, where are we to go?"

I pretended to ponder it. "I have my own destination, which we will speak of tomorrow."

The two of them did not dare to remain long. They left after a brief interval, first giving me a pill to let Jing Weiyi continue to play a corpse.

I took the pill, and Jing Weiyi's soul settled into a deeper sleep. I stretched out on the platform and waited for my destination to come to me.

Just as I expected, Liu Tongyi came again. From the sound of it, he had brought a big group of guards. First, he asked whether the guards and eunuchs keeping watch here had experienced anything unusual.

"There has been nothing unusual," a guard responded, "but for reasons unknown, we all inexplicably fell asleep."

At once someone cried out sternly, "How bold! His Majesty ordered you to guard the body strictly, without any mishaps! Yet you dare to defy an imperial edict and malinger. You can well imagine what a crime this is!"

The guards and eunuchs kowtowed and begged forgiveness.

Just then, I heard Liu Tongyi say, "Lord He, this being the case, it would be appropriate to examine the corpse once more."

Lord He immediately gave his firm agreement. He came toward me with vigorous strides and snatched away the cloth covering me.

Then I used a bit of magic to raise a chill wind. The door and windows rattled, the curtains trembled.

The hall instantly fell silent. There was no more sound even from Lord He.

A young eunuch, his teeth chattering, said, "H-he's here… He's here again… His Highness Prince Huai… His resentment cannot be calmed… He has come to haunt us…"

Lord He took a few steps back, but he still said forcefully, "Utter claptrap! How could a rebel who committed suicide haunt you?" He spat. "At least asking to be cremated shows he had some self-awareness. The sooner he's cremated, the better!"

"Lord He," said Liu Tongyi gently, "perhaps His Highness Prince Huai thinks that having his corpse examined before a crowd is a disgrace. But if no examination is performed, there will be room for error, so why not have the others withdraw while you and I perform the examination together?"

I strengthened my assault. The chill wind blew more violently. I heard Lord He back away further. "I will go out with the others to patrol the temple and see if anything is amiss. If I might leave examining the body to Chancellor Liu?"

Followed by a series of scrambling footsteps, he made a hasty departure.

The hall was still as death. The door shut softly. The latch fell into place.

I heard him approach, then turned over and got up. I spat out the piece of jade, took him by the sleeve, and heedless of everything else, again stopped his mouth with mine.

More kisses would deepen his affection and give me a more powerful hold over him.

He stood there and let me kiss him. After a while, I released him and drew close to his ear to whisper, "Ransi, I love you."

Liu Tongyi's body stiffened again. He drew away slightly. It was growing light now. He was looking at me with an extremely peculiar expression.

I snatched up one of his hands and squeezed it tightly. "It's the truth," I said quietly. "I must leave soon, and I'm afraid… after I go… I won't have a chance to say these words to you."

He looked at me with a slight furrow in his brow and softly said, "When do you move?"

"Before the cremation, after the examination," I said. "There are people to receive me, there is a corpse to act as substitute. Do not worry." I sighed quietly. "But the

place I had made ready to go to has been found out by His Majesty. I do not yet know where to seek refuge."

I put my other hand over his hand. "Therefore, I do not know whether I will succeed. Perhaps we will not meet again. Ransi, thank you for helping me. In this life and the next, I will remember you. What a pity that it was not meant to be between us. I know there is no way you can love me. But I am already content that you can let me love you."

Liu Tongyi looked directly into my eyes, then averted his gaze. With a soft sigh, he said, "Is that so."

For an instant, I felt unsure of my ground. His eyes seemed to see through me. I squeezed his hand again and passionately said, "I love you, whether you believe it or not. There is no one but Ransi in my heart."

This didn't amount to a lie. None of these people had anything to do with me to begin with, and now the only one of them I cared about was Liu Tongyi. Whether I succeeded or failed depended entirely on him.

Liu Tongyi pulled his hand away and said nothing.

When I had lain back down to impersonate a corpse, he covered me with the cloth and quietly said, "You, take good care of yourself."

He straightened the edges of the cloth and smoothed it. "There is an empty house in Qincai Alley in Suzhou, the only house in the alley. Apart from me, no one knows of it."

One shichen later, I boarded a carriage in the wilderness, and the capital receded into the distance behind me.

Zhang Xiao said, "Your Highness, shall we go to the place in Zhengyang Prefecture arranged by the princess before her death?"

"No need for the present," I said. "First we will go to Qincai Alley in Suzhou. There is an empty house there where we can shelter temporarily."

I closed my eyes. Jing Weiyi's soul was stirring restlessly inside the body.

He would soon wake.

I said, "I will rest now. Knowledge of the empty house might threaten another's life. I hope you two will not mention it again. We will only occupy it."

Chief Stewards Zhang and Cao agreed sympathetically.

Chief Steward Cao added, "When we've crossed the river, I'll break away and bid you farewell to avoid suspicion and leave Old Zhang to accompany Your Highness to Suzhou. His teacher happens to be in Jiangnan, and he will be able to treat Your

Highness's leg."

Jing Weiyi's crippled leg could be healed? What an unexpected surprise.

I pretended that I needed a nap, ready to let Jing Weiyi out for a time so he would not grow suspicious.

I could not be too rash in attempting to steal this body. Leave no one the wiser, squeeze out and scatter Jing Weiyi's soul; that was the best plan.

When I closed my eyes and lay down, somehow I thought of Liu Tongyi again.

A taste still lingered on my lips. I did not know whether I would see him again.

Unexpectedly, I really did think very well of him. If I were Jing Weiyi, I would certainly love only him, turn the words I had said to him into the unvarnished truth.

If I were Jing Weiyi—perhaps it would not be long before that "if" came true.

IV.

In the depths of night, I strolled in the courtyard, stargazing.

It was some days already since I had moved into the house in Qincai Alley. Since Jing Weiyi's awakening, the day belonged to him, and the night was mine. He had not discovered me, and I controlled him in secret, every moment. Our cohabitation was harmonious enough.

Zhang Xiao had obeyed me and hadn't brought up anything concerning this house again. Jing Weiyi only took this for a secret residence prepared by Zhang Xiao and did not ask questions, keeping the truth concealed from both sides.

Zhang Xiao had asked around over the last few days; no one in Suzhou City knew Jing Weiyi. This house had only one other small house neighboring it, also perpetually unoccupied. After learning this, Zhang Xiao ran the risk of temporarily leaving Jing Weiyi here alone to go invite his teacher to come treat Jing Weiyi's leg. He had left only this morning and would likely return in three or four days.

Therefore, in this whole house, only Jing Weiyi and I remained, one man and one ghost, making it more convenient for me to torment him.

Jing Weiyi's soul was no match for mine, but because this body was his, if it came to an open contest, I would have no advantages. I had to act in secret.

This body was linked to the life force of his soul. When he fell asleep, I would take over his body and move around. How could mortal flesh and blood support going day and night without rest? Before, because of Zhang Xiao's presence, I couldn't be too obvious about it and had to let Jing Weiyi's body rest for one

shichen. Jing Weiyi's soul had already weakened a great deal. Now that Zhang Xiao had left, I didn't rest for a moment. Before Zhang Xiao returned, Jing Weiyi's soul would disperse from the exhaustion of his flesh, and this body could become wholly mine.

Because of the feebleness of his body and soul, Jing Weiyi was listless and languishing. He ate, he sat, he became lost in his thoughts, he heaved a few sighs, and just like that, the day would be done. He thought that this was Zhang Xiao or his teacher's house and kept himself to the small hall in the rooms Zhang Xiao had cleaned up. When night came, I was bored, so I went everywhere.

This house wasn't very small. It was simple and secluded and had long stood unoccupied. A great deal of weeds and wildflowers grew in the courtyard, and trees and shrubs grew freely, giving the place a natural feeling.

Apart from the spots Zhang Xiao had cleaned up, the rooms were all locked. Though I was inhabiting the body of a mortal, I could still use some magic. So, when I was bored, I opened room after room to look inside.

There was nothing special in these rooms, and dust lay thickly over them. I found ordinary bedrooms, rooms where playthings were stored, rooms stacked full of books, and one room that was unexpectedly full of weapons, with a record of the contents on a bookshelf. There was another room in the deepest recesses of the house that looked like a study; an inkstone and a brush that had not been put away still lay on the desk, and even an abandoned sheet of paper with writing on it. But the ink on the inkstone was dry, and a spiderweb stretched from the tip of the brush. The unfurled sheet of paper and the manuscript heaped up on the desk were both yellowed, covered in dust.

I flipped through the manuscript. The handwriting was elegant, but what was written wasn't an article on the state of the world or a metered verse expressing emotions; it was a martial arts romance. It was bizarre and unconstrained, surpassing my imagination.

I had only heard of the existence of such books before, not read them. I'd never thought I would inadvertently expand my outlook after many years as a ghost. It was marvelous, outstripping all expectations.

Unfortunately, this manuscript stopped before it reached the end. I felt an unbearable itch and searched the room, coming up with many stories that had both beginning and end. Yesterday I had read up to an amazing part in one, but it was getting light and Jing Weiyi would wake soon, so I had to forebear and let go. I held out until Jing Weiyi fell asleep, sauntered around the courtyard, then went to that

room and took some manuscripts. I moved over a low table and a reclining chair and sat out on the veranda reading closely by lamplight.

While absorbed in reading, I suddenly noticed a hint of movement. I heard light footsteps slowly coming close. Upon setting down the papers and raising my head, I saw a figure walk in through the moon gate.

I was a ghost, but this living man gave me a fright.

I scrutinized him; it was Liu Tongyi.

Why… would he be here?

Had he come after Jing Weiyi? Or had he been interrogating Jing Weiyi's confederates on the emperor's behalf, and now was coming to reel me in? Or had he discovered that something was wrong?

I looked closely. Apart from Liu Tongyi, no one was around.

I stood, walked down from the veranda, and deliberately displayed astonishment. "Ransi? Why have you come here…"

In the night, Liu Tongyi's standing figure looked like a specter, a paper-cut silhouette.

"Please do not worry, Your Highness. I pled illness and retired to my home, then left the capital in secret. Hard on the heels of Prince Huai's death, with everything in such chaos, my absence will go unnoticed."

He smiled slightly. "In fact, I arrived in Suzhou two days ago, only just after Your Highness. The little house behind this one is my private residence. There is a secret door connecting them."

Oh. I smiled, too, and clasped his arm. "Ransi, I understand. You couldn't stand to see me go. You were uneasy, so you came after me, is that it?"

Liu Tongyi's smile widened. "Yes, I was very uneasy, so I came after Your Highness. But because Chief Steward Zhang was here, I could not show myself."

I hadn't thought Liu Tongyi was so besotted with Jing Weiyi; he had actually followed him all the way to Suzhou. Just as I was thinking of him, he had taken the initiative and brought himself before me.

I was just wondering whether I ought to hug Liu Tongyi again, give him a kiss to demonstrate my surprise and the depth of my affection, when Liu Tongyi's sleeve slipped from my hand and he walked toward the veranda. "What is Your Highness reading?"

I said airily, "Old Zhang wanted to clean up the house for you. While sweeping up, he saw these manuscripts in one of the rooms, so I took them out to read. These

so-called martial arts romances are actually really good. Don't blame me for touching the stuff in your house, Ransi."

Liu Tongyi still wore an impassive smile. "These things are all old and of no significance. If Your Highness likes them, by all means, read them."

I saw something in his hand, which he put on the table. "I do not know whether Your Highness has eaten. I thought that, as Chief Steward Zhang has just left, the food still in the house would have to be conserved, so I brought over some pastries." As he spoke, he opened the paper bag he held. A number of sweet-smelling pastries were packed in it.

"This is good," I praised. "Let me get a small charcoal stove to boil water and steep a pot of tea. You and I will stargaze from the veranda."

"The tea must be strong," Liu Tongyi said.

"Naturally," I said, smiling.

When I had steeped the tea and was sitting with Liu Tongyi on the veranda, I sighed. "Seeing you now, Ransi," I said, "is like a visitation from another life, and also like a dream."

Liu Tongyi raised his teacup. "From the small building in the house behind, I've watched this house, watched it for two days. Ever since Your Highness asked for my help inside the prison in the capital, there has been a question in my mind that I have very much wanted to ask."

He drank some tea, put down his teacup, and asked me directly, "Might I inquire of Your Excellency, who are you really?"

My hand froze in the middle of lifting my teacup. "Ransi, what are you saying?"

Liu Tongyi frowned slightly, his gaze sharp, his expression stern. "Having rescued Your Excellency, of course I will not reveal it. But I just want to know who you really are, and where His Highness Prince Huai is."

I looked at him in the lamplight and shadow. Liu Tongyi had surprised me.

Smiling again, I said, "Ransi, you're only muddled with sleep. In what aspect am I behaving improperly that you would say such a thing?"

Placidly, Liu Tongyi said, "In outward appearance, there is no difference between Your Excellency and His Highness Prince Huai. Whether in the imperial prison or prior to Your Excellency's brilliant escape, there was no time and no reason to replace the original with a fake. However…" He sighed again. "Your Excellency and His Highness Prince Huai have nothing in common."

I smiled again and sipped some tea. "All right, let's do this. You tell me in what ways I'm different, and I'll tell you what you want to know, all right?"

Liu Tongyi looked at me with an expression that was a little conflicted and helpless. “His Highness Prince Huai would never say such a thing with such an expression in such a tone.”

A person could change, tone could alter, speech could arise from shifting moods. I had many excuses I could use to refute what Liu Tongyi said, but I listened to him go on.

“His Highness Prince Huai doesn’t like sweets. He doesn’t eat pastries with these flavors.

“His Highness Prince Huai doesn’t drink strong tea at night.

“His Highness Prince Huai doesn’t rifle through other people’s belongings.

“His Highness Prince Huai has read the manuscript Your Excellency is now reading.”

And so on.

I listened as he rattled them off one after another, and at last heard him say, “The one His Highness Prince Huai loves is not me. What Your Excellency has done, has said, he would not say, would not do.”

I smiled sincerely and raised my eyebrows as I looked at him. “So despite harboring these suspicions, you still saved me, just for the sake of solving the riddle and learning where Jing Weiyi is? Why do you love Jing Weiyi so much? He doesn’t care for you at all.”

“I have stated my causes,” said Liu Tongyi. “Please tell me the truth, Your Excellency.”

I continued, “The one Jing Weiyi loves is Yun Yu. His heart is full of him. When he called your name as he was dying, he only wanted to scare you so you wouldn’t suspect he was pretending and make his escape more convenient. He’ll never sincerely say that he loves you. Why treat him like this?”

Liu Tongyi’s expression did not falter. His tone was mild. “Please tell me the truth, Your Excellency.”

I sneered. “And why do you feign composure, saying ‘His Highness Prince Huai,’ with every breath? Who knows how many times you have cried out, ‘Weiyi, Weiyi,’ in your heart?”

Liu Tongyi looked at me placidly. Placidly, he said, “His Highness Prince Huai usually prefers people to call him by his courtesy name.”

Oh? That threw me off.

Liu Tongyi continued flatly, “In other words, if I were to cry out in my heart, I would be calling, ‘Chengjun, Chengjun,’ not, ‘Weiyi, Weiyi.”

Hm.

Liu Tongyi added: "Of course, I also think Chengjun has a more pleasing sound than Weiyi."

Oh.

I looked at Liu Tongyi speechlessly for a long moment, then said, "Fine, I'll tell you. It's up to you whether you believe it. I'm not going to lie, but you definitely won't believe me. Actually—I'm a ghost."

Liu Tongyi looked at me without any reaction.

I thought that he hadn't understood.

"A hanged ghost," I added. "I died in that prison cell many years ago." I stuck out my tongue and let my eyes roll up. "Bleh, just like this, a hanged ghost."

Liu Tongyi still didn't react, or didn't understand.

I continued, probing deeper, "Because I could never find a scapegoat—you know, a hanged ghost can only reincarnate if he finds a scapegoat—I had to take over Jing Weiyi's body. Right now, this body is Jing Weiyi's, of course. During the day, his soul controls it; during the night, my soul controls it. I am preparing to give his body no rest day or night, so that his soul grows feeble and scatters. In this way, I can completely take over this body."

When I finished my explanation, I observed the changes in Liu Tongyi. I saw that his brow was slightly furrowed again, and his expression was thoughtful. I said, "You see, you don't believe me."

Liu Tongyi's brow smoothed. "So that's it."

I was astonished. "You believe me?"

Liu Tongyi's expression indeed showed no sign of disbelief. "I only believe the truth, and the truth is before my eyes. However bizarre it may be, it is the truth. During the washing of the corpse, among those present was Young Master Chu Xun, who was often close to His Highness Prince Huai. I could not understand, as Your Excellency was not His Highness Prince Huai, why your body would in fact be His Highness Prince Huai's."

I frowned, looking at Liu Tongyi, and said sincerely, "Ransi, I really do love you more and more."

Smiling, Liu Tongyi said, "Your Excellency must have had enough of this joke at my expense."

"I'm being honest," I said earnestly.

Liu Tongyi picked up his teacup. "I see. Thank you. But now that I know the truth, I must think of a way to resolve this. Your Excellency is a ghost. Is it because

of an unfulfilled wish that you have inhabited His Highness Prince Huai's body?"

I also filled my teacup. "Do you want to ask me what would make me willing to release Jing Weiyi? I have no unfulfilled wish. I only want a body. Jing Weiyi's body happens to suit my tastes, so I don't plan on leaving."

Liu Tongyi said, "If all Your Excellency wants is a body to inhabit, then perhaps there is still room to negotiate."

Still room to negotiate? Was he going to find me another body?

Or, even more touching, was Liu Tongyi planning to act as substitute for Jing Weiyi, give up his body so I could inhabit it?

I roundly refused. "I just think Jing Weiyi is more suitable. Ransi, why must you throw me out? Your whole court wanted Jing Weiyi to die anyway, and he also didn't want to live. Why not let me have this? As for you, I know you love Jing Weiyi. You can keep treating me like Jing Weiyi, just as if he'd had a change of temperament."

I threw down my teacup and drew close to him. "That Jing Weiyi has a heart full of someone else. I only love you. Starting today, Jing Weiyi will love only Ransi. I'll have a body, you'll have Jing Weiyi. Won't both sides be satisfied?"

Liu Tongyi gently put down his teacup. "Supposing that I loved His Highness Prince Huai, even if I were willing to lie to myself, I still couldn't tolerate a body whose soul had changed. All things in this world have their own destinations, their own causes and effects. Why use force to take what is not yours?"

"I am a ghost," I said, smiling. "The world's rules can't bind me. There are some things that can only be obtained by force. Actually, I can see that your temperament isn't truly cold and unworldly." I felt for a manuscript on the table and flipped through it. "These martial arts tales, they must have been written by you? Upright on the surface but burning within. With your temperament, Jing Weiyi can't appreciate your virtues. Perhaps if you try spending time with me, you'll find that we are more suited for each other."

Liu Tongyi smiled slightly and said, "In the many years since I took on an official position, the only person who has sincerely called me upright, apart from His Highness Prince Huai, is Your Excellency."

He took another manuscript from the table and gathered it up neatly. Suddenly, he changed the subject. "Might I inquire of Your Excellency, what is your age?"

I froze. Curling up the corners of my mouth, I said, "I am but a ghost. It's hard to keep track of the time."

Liu Tongyi put aside the orderly papers. “I mean to ask about Your Excellency’s age when you passed away.”

Did he want to investigate my origins to make it easier to deal with me?

“Guess,” I answered breezily.

But Liu Tongyi did not speak. I stood up. “If you want to find out who I am, then think of a way to expel me, I’m afraid there’s not enough time. Jing Weiyi’s soul can hold out another two or three days at most. But I am willing to give you a chance. If you can guess who I am, I will leave Jing Weiyi’s body.”

Liu Tongyi lowered his eyelashes and bent his head slightly. “Very well.”

I studied his profile in the lamplight. For the first time, I said from the heart, “I’m willing to give you this chance because I love you. I really do love you very much now, Ransi.”

And I know that you’ll never guess who I am.

Liu Tongyi stood as well. With a bland smile, he said, “If Your Excellency loves me only because you have read these manuscripts, then you love the wrong person. These manuscripts were written by my father, and he has been dead many years.”

He walked up to the railing and looked out into the distant, dense night. “This house is a private residence purchased by my father. Its former name is the House of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills. Apart from him, I am the only one who knows of it.”

V.

The next day, when evening came, I muscled out Jing Weiyi and sent him to sleep, then went to pull out the manuscripts Liu Tongyi’s father had written to read again.

I had thought that it was just a coincidence that Liu Tongyi’s surname was Liu. Only yesterday when I had heard him mention it had I learned that he was a descendant of Liu Jin. It surprised me that the Liu clan had thrived for many generations. I tried to imagine the look on Grand Tutor Liu Jin’s face, he who had only been capable of looking grave and delivering ponderous truths, if he learned that his descendant had written such vulgar romances.

When night fell, Liu Tongyi came again, and he brought some side dishes, plain porridge, and cakes.

Glancing at the cakes, I said, “Didn’t you say that Jing Weiyi doesn’t eat sweets? Why did you bring these?”

"Yesterday I saw that Your Excellency greatly enjoyed these two delicacies," said Liu Tongyi.

Smiling, I said, "Ransi is truly considerate."

While he was laying out the dishes, I asked, "Why do you only come to see me, not Jing Weiyi? If he knew you had helped him, he would certainly be grateful to you, and perhaps gratitude would give rise to love."

Liu Tongyi put a bowl of porridge in front of me. "I very much want to know whether there is a hidden story behind His Highness faking his death to escape, and the rebellion, but taking relative severity into account, I first have to solve the problem of how to invite Your Excellency to leave His Highness's body. Besides which, having managed to escape, if His Highness sees me without warning, I'm afraid…"

I gazed at him and said gently, "Ransi, why do you love him? You rescued him without regard for anything, and now you're still trying to come up with a way to oust me so you can save him. He won't spare a single kind thought for you."

Liu Tongyi smiled. "There are many reasons for me to do this. The greatest reason is that I want to know the truth behind the whole business. I was the one who set up the plot to investigate His Highness Prince Huai, but after he went to prison, when I checked the evidence, I found many points of suspicion. And as for His Highness's confession, I also thought it was strange… Maybe I am still worried about there being injustice and bias involved in His Highness Prince Huai's case."

As he said this, his expression was rather leaden. He was speaking his true thoughts.

"Your helping Jing Weiyi fake his death and escape," I said, "isn't that treason against the emperor?"

"So I am no loyal courtier," said Liu Tongyi. "I only value right and wrong, actions committed and uncommitted, wrongs done or undone. At court, many things cannot be clearly judged as right or wrong, but at the most fundamental level, there can be no ambiguity."

I put a hand to my cheek. As he spoke these grave words, there was much in his manner of Grand Tutor Liu; it gave me an irresistible ache in my molars.

But Liu Tongyi was much better looking than Grand Tutor Liu. Even pulling a long face, he was still graceful and adorable.

I cupped my cheek with my right hand and watched him draw his brows together, about to go on talking about Jing Weiyi. Suddenly I wanted to shut him up, so before he could start, I got up and came forward. Catching him off guard,

lightning-quick, I stopped his mouth with mine.

Practice makes perfect; the more practiced, the more natural—I kissed him awhile, then released him. I drew close to his ear and said, "Ransi, let's not speak of Jing Weiyi. His soul will soon scatter. Even if only to save him, you have to speak more of me."

I stepped back a little and considered his expression, then clutched his sleeve. "What, are you angry?"

Liu Tongyi still wore that same expression; it gave me a feeling of dejection. I sat back down to my porridge. Liu Tongyi placed another dish in front of me. "My investigation has already yielded some preliminary results, but tonight I am indeed unable to determine Your Excellency's identity."

He trimmed the lamp wick. "Yesterday Your Excellency told me your cause of death. Vanishingly few people have been confined in that cell, and I have read all the pertinent records. But the Ministry of Justice's records concerning the causes of death of the people confined in that cell are not necessarily true. Therefore, they must be investigated and verified anew."

He wouldn't breathe a word unless he was sure.

He was in Suzhou now, unable to search the records of the court in the capital. His so-called investigation and verification would have to consist of observing my every word and gesture and determining the possible truth from that.

I took the napkin he offered and wiped my mouth. "Ransi, it's a pleasant night. Inside the canopy, under the covers, I might well tell you everything."

I stared at his expression and added considerately, "The first time, if it's still strange to you, you can act like I'm him for now, call me Chengjun. I won't object."

His expression composed, Liu Tongyi said, "His Highness Prince Huai was often served in bed by a Young Master Chu Xun."

Oh?

Liu Tongyi continued, "Young Master Chu Xun was actually acting under orders to get close to His Highness Prince Huai and to search for evidence that he was plotting a rebellion. But he was with His Highness Prince Huai for a long time without finding a single piece of decent evidence."

Well, now…

Liu Tongyi sighed. "This is sufficient to bear out that 'pillow talk' cannot be relied upon. There is no need for me to test it."

Oh.

The next morning, I opened the secret door in the wall of the rear court and entered Liu Tongyi's little house.

Liu Tongyi had told me that he was alone in this house, without retinue. In this little residence, green bamboo set off two or three wings. A door was open, the windows propped up. I crept up to a window and saw Liu Tongyi sitting at a table in the room, reading something. When he raised his head and saw me outside the window, he was stunned.

I didn't speak. Dragging one leg behind me, I limped to the door. Liu Tongyi got to his feet slowly, bracing himself against the table. Smiling, I said, "Ransi, have you guessed who I am?"

Liu Tongyi was appalled. "Why has Your Excellency appeared during the day?"

I looked into his face and felt an inexplicable trace of sadness. "I wanted to have a look at you by daylight, so I came over," I said, deliberately blithe.

I paused, then added, "Relax, Jing Weiyi's soul is doing fine. He's too weak now. If I let him sleep a little longer, he won't dissipate as quickly. It's for his own good."

Liu Tongyi's expression calmed.

I went to look at the things on his desk, some files and books.

"You brought work with you to Suzhou?" I took a book and flipped through it. "And you said you weren't a loyal courtier. Clearly you're a slavishly devoted imperial chancellor." I put the book back down and shook out a stack of paper next to it. Under the papers, which were covered in writing, there turned out to be a big heap of paintings.

I flipped through them doubtfully. Some were meticulously rendered, and others consisted of a few sloppy strokes, but without exception, all the paintings contained willow leaves and willow branches, and a man.

The man in all these paintings was always drawn from the back or in vague profile, his features never delineated in detail. He wore a gown, or an official robe, stood or sat, the atmosphere and scenery different from image to image. But I could tell these paintings were of a single person. Some lines of poetry were also inscribed on the paintings.

I couldn't resist saying to Liu Tongyi, "These… wouldn't happen to be Jing Weiyi's paintings of you…"

Liu Tongyi didn't answer. It was a tacit acknowledgment.

I flipped through them again. "What terrible paintings," I said honestly. "The handwriting is hideous. The poetry… How could anyone write this!"

Liu Tongyi's silence continued. I graciously abandoned my commentary. "Did Jing Weiyi show you these? Is that why you're dead set on him…?"

"These paintings were found in the place that supposedly contained evidence that His Highness Prince Huai was plotting rebellion," said Liu Tongyi. "In that secret cabinet, there was nothing apart from these."

So Liu Tongyi had seen these paintings, was touched, and fell in love with Jing Weiyi?

"The one he truly loves is Yun Yu," I said.

Liu Tongyi's expression remained composed. "I know," he said. One by one, he gathered up the papers that I had scattered. "His Highness Prince Huai previously mistook the person his heart was bound to. These paintings were done while he was mistaken. Afterward they were put aside and stored in the secret cabinet."

An indescribable taste surged up in my throat. "False displays of affection," I said, sneering. "You may as well not look. Ugly handwriting, some ugly paintings, a few ugly poems. My work was better when I was eight years old."

He put the orderly papers back on the desk. I put my hand over his. "Ransi, I'll draw for you. I'll draw from the heart, much better than him. Will you love me then?"

Liu Tongyi looked back at me with an indefinable sort of helplessness in his eyes. "And for what reason does Your Excellency say this?"

What reason? Probably because in the imperial prison, when I had seen his expression as he witnessed Jing Weiyi's false death, I had felt irresistible envy.

Only after becoming a ghost had I learned that the rarest and most precious thing in the world was true love, without ulterior motives or desires. Jing Weiyi didn't value Liu Tongyi's virtues. Why shouldn't I attempt to take his place, have that for myself?

So I said earnestly, "Because I love you."

That indulgent smile once again appeared on Liu Tongyi's face. Suddenly, he raised his hand. Before I could react, I felt his hand fall on the top of my head and give it a rub.

I darted back a pace. I still felt a chill from the touch of Liu Tongyi's sleeve.

Liu Tongyi's expression was apologetic. "Forgive me, I couldn't help myself."

I was a little stiff. Liu Tongyi's eyes stopped on my face. He sighed and took a step forward. He raised his hand and stroked the top of my head again.

He was slightly shorter than Jing Weiyi, but this gesture from him was extremely practiced and natural.

"Your Excellency, how many years short of coming of age were you? Six years? Seven? Eight…"

In my bewilderment, I inadvertently blurted out, "Only four or five years short of twenty. I've been a ghost for so many years, isn't it ridiculous to consider how long I was alive?"

Liu Tongyi was silent. At last, his expression changed as he looked at me. A bit of pity filtered in.

I came to my senses at once. "You've guessed who I am?"

Liu Tongyi was already kneeling. "Your Highness, I acted discourteously before. I ask for forgiveness."

I leaned down to raise Liu Tongyi to his feet. "Get up. I was only the eldest son of an imperial prince, less distinguished than an imperial uncle like Jing Weiyi. You don't have to go out of your way to perform this obeisance. Just treat me like you did before."

Once he was standing, I put my hands behind my back and sighed. "Ransi, I've lost. I'm willing to pay the price for losing and scrupulously abide by my promise."

Liu Tongyi stood there quietly. I raised my eyelids and looked at him. "However, I don't know how to leave Jing Weiyi's body."

At last panic reappeared in Liu Tongyi's expression. I was very pleased with myself and put on a display of *I'm very willing but there's nothing I can do.*

Liu Tongyi stood there without making a sound for a while, then turned aside.

He rolled up his sleeves, picked up a chair, walked out the door onto the veranda, and put the chair down. He came back inside and picked up another chair.

I watched in astonishment as he finished moving chairs and went on to move a table. Then he carried over a kettle to brew tea and a tea service and arranged them on the table, then brought out plates of refreshments.

Finally, he took me to the table on the veranda and pushed me into a chair. I blankly snatched up a lotus root paste flaky bun and ate it. I sat there and watched as Liu Tongyi brewed tea and poured it. Finally, he placed a cup of tea in front of me. He stroked my head. "It's all right. If you don't know how, Your Highness and I can take our time and find a way."

Biting into the bun, I watched him sit down across from me. For some reason, all the hair on the back of my neck wanted to stand up.

Liu Tongyi pushed the teacup toward me. "Why did Your Highness go to prison?" he asked gently. "The account in the official records is extremely scant. It only says that Prince Chen's eldest son defied the emperor and was sent to prison,

then was suddenly taken ill and died within two days."

Of course that was the cause of death given. I smiled. "The reason is about what you said."

"Then there is still some disparity," said Liu Tongyi. "Was Your Highness unjustly accused? Is that why you were unable to ascend to heaven?"

I shook my head. "No. You said yourself that in many things, there is no so-called right and wrong or black and white. Back then, I wanted to be done with it all and not bother about it anymore, but unfortunately, as a hanged ghost without a substitute, all I could do was linger in the prison."

But Liu Tongyi still asked, "Why did Your Highness defy the emperor?"

I thought about it. "After all these years, I've almost forgotten the reason. But let me ask you some questions. If you answer truthfully, maybe I'll remember."

"Go ahead and ask, Your Highness," Liu Tongyi said readily.

I stared into his eyes. "Why do you love Jing Weiyi?" I asked emphatically. "Why can't you love me instead?"

Liu Tongyi smiled. "I love Your Highness very much."

I sneered. "You aren't telling the truth. Then we have nothing to talk about."

"I wouldn't say I'm lying," said Liu Tongyi. "If you mean that kind of love… I really don't know whether you could say I love His Highness Prince Huai."

Liu Tongyi poured more tea into the cup in front of him.

"The residence Your Highness is staying in currently is called the House of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills. It was left behind by my late father. When my father was gravely ill, I inadvertently caught him writing and learned that he had another name, the Scholar of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills, and he wrote martial arts romances. I was about the same age as Your Highness then. I was extremely shocked to learn of this. My father was a reserved and upright person. I had never imagined he could have this other identity. After my father passed away, I was the only one in the world who knew of this, and of this residence. I found all the romances he had written and read them, and even found books similar to his and read those… Later, my grandfather brought me back to the capital. I did not dare tell him about my father, because my grandfather, as well as my uncle, as well as the officials and scholars like them, all said that martial arts romances were filth unfit for polite society. To them, the people who wrote these romances disgraced the sages and had no character to speak of…"

Liu Tongyi said that, despite this, he had thought that his father's romances were better written than many serious works, yet he did not know whether he was going

against the lessons of the wise, nor did he know whom he ought to endorse between his grandfather and his father. He was on one hand conflicted but continued to look for romances to read in secret. Even when he attended a palace banquet with his grandfather, he still found an opportunity to sneak off and read and unwittingly ran into Jing Weiyi.

"At the time, His Highness Prince Huai said to me that he loved the Scholar of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills's books. His commentary on martial arts romances was as conscientious as if he were opining on serious works. That was when I realized that martial arts romances and the books of the sages alike are all written from the heart by people of the world to express their feelings, just using different methods. Among writings, there are no distinctions between high and low, noble and vulgar. And many reasons for liking or disliking them, when you get down to it, arise only from your own preferences."

He said that, later, for Jing Weiyi's mother's birthday, he accompanied his mother on a congratulatory visit. He wanted to talk with Jing Weiyi again about martial arts romances. When he found the rear garden, he saw Jing Weiyi playing in the snow with a crowd of princes.

He stood under the eaves then, looking on from afar as, amid the falling snow, Jing Weiyi held the princes up one after another to pick plum blossoms. Suddenly, he had understood what his grandfather had meant when he said that the Liu clan and Prince Huai were not the same kind of people. The scene then had been like a painting, but he was doomed to be a mere observer.

Some principles in life only take an instant to comprehend.

Liu Tongyi set down his teacup. "Being an observer suits me better."

So, from then on, he had only watched from a distance.

From the outside, one could see very clearly many things that the person in the painting could not see.

Such as his preferences, his habits, the person who was always beside him, whom he truly loved, who suited him.

My teeth ached a little. I frowned and said, "So you told him that it was Yun Yu he truly loved?" I had an instantaneous impression of a halo behind his head.

"When you did this, did you feel you were being especially noble, especially understanding, as if you had one foot among the clouds and were about to fly up to heaven?"

"I am not the one he loves," said Liu Tongyi. "Even if he was mistaken for a time, he would eventually realize the truth. Then there would be trouble for everyone. I

didn't want to come to grief." He smiled. "In reality, I'm a selfish person who doesn't want trouble."

I wordlessly picked up a pastry and stuffed it into my mouth. Then I drank some tea. "Now that you're rescuing him, you're not an observer anymore, are you?"

"It's just that the painting might wrinkle, and it's up to me, the observer, to smooth it out. I don't want to have nothing left to look at in the future."

I was absolutely speechless. I thought that the halo behind his head was dazzlingly bright.

"Forget it. You're tired of watching. How about I love you, you love me, we make each other happy. Much more straightforward."

I bit into another flaky bun and sincerely proposed, "I'll get rid of Jing Weiyi right now, and you and I will make a fresh start!"

Liu Tongyi's face fell. I laughed. "I'm kidding. Since you've told me the truth, I'll tell you how to expel a ghost like me."

I stood up and patted down my clothes. "Go find some peach tree branches and yellow rice wine and boil them together, then make Jing Weiyi drink the wine. I won't be able to hold out. Peach wood is used to expel ghosts, so it won't do Jing Weiyi any harm."

Liu Tongyi frowned. "But you…"

"Well," I said, "I'll go back out to be a wandering spirit. If you're grateful to me, burn me some funeral money and do some good deeds. Maybe I'll be able to go to the underworld. But I'm very pleased that you asked."

I went into the courtyard and looked all around. I had always wanted to go to Jiangnan. I'd never thought that when I finally got to go, I would only get to see two houses.

Liu Tongyi still stood on the veranda. "Hurry up and go look," I said, "and make sure I drink it before the sun sinks beneath the mountains tonight, or else you'll have to wait for tomorrow." I turned. "I'll be waiting for you next door."

VI.

In the afternoon, Liu Tongyi came as arranged. I narrowed my eyes at the wine and peach branches in his hands, then looked at the sky. It was still early. There was some time to go till dusk.

I brought a small copper stove and a small pot so Liu Tongyi could boil the wine, then stood aside with my hands in my sleeves, watching.

The yellow wine poured into the pot, and its fragrance wafted all around. I stepped forward to hug Liu Tongyi and kissed him again.

His expression shifted. I released him. "It's nothing. I'm just a little frustrated because soon I won't be able to kiss you again."

Liu Tongyi asked me softly, "What happened to you?"

I sat down on the steps. "Isn't it enough that I'm leaving? Why must you ask too much?"

"Since you are leaving," said Liu Tongyi, "what prevents you from telling me?"

I smiled at him and still did not say.

When the wine infused with peach tree branches had boiled long enough, I approached, picked it up, and poured it into a bowl.

The wine reflected the light of the setting sun and also took on an evening glow. I took a rolled-up paper from my sleeve and handed it to Liu Tongyi, then watched him unroll it.

"What do you think? My painting is much better than Jing Weiyi's."

The painting was a snowy scene I had tried to draw in accordance with Liu Tongyi's description earlier, of him when he was young standing on the veranda, watching Jing Weiyi picking plum blossoms with the princes in the snow.

I had never seen Liu Tongyi when he was younger, only drawn what I guessed he had looked like, but I thought that my painting must look much more like him than Jing Weiyi's.

"You think someone else is in the painting, so there must be someone who thinks you are in the painting."

I'd just wanted to show him this painting and say these words to Liu Tongyi.

I clutched his sleeve. "Ransi, do you know why I'm willing to go? Because when you said those things to me, I really did love you, really."

The light of the setting sun slanted down. Briefly, my vision dimmed, and I had the impression that he loved me a little too.

I let go of his sleeve. "Forget it. I wanted to see whether I could convince you to relent in the end, but even a ghost has to abide by his promise."

I picked up the bowl and drained it in one go. I pointed at the painting he held. "The signature there is my nickname."

My body grew unsteady. The yin energy I had scraped together was dissipating bit by bit.

I lay down on a reclining chair. Liu Tongyi grabbed the cuff of my sleeve. "You…"

In fact, Liu Tongyi, when you guessed who I was, you guessed wrong.

However clever you might be, you couldn't have guessed right.

I yawned. "That's right, Zishu is our nickname.

"Our name is Jing Su. We ought to be enjoying offerings in the ancestral temple of the imperial family.

"You should have been calling us Emperor Taizong.

"The one who ruled the empire and was interred in the ancestral temple was our twin brother, Jing Yuan.

"Your forefather Liu Jin, along with our mother the empress, thought that because we were partial to painting and calligraphy, we were unsuited to be emperor and therefore replaced us with Prince Jin, then immured us in a stone prison under the name of Prince Chen's eldest son."

Jing Yuan and I were twin brothers. Because I was born slightly earlier, the advantage went to me, and I became crown prince.

I'd had no interest originally in being crown prince. Jing Yuan was skilled in martial arts, excelled in horsemanship and archery, liked to study warcraft. He closely resembled our father the emperor. I had told my father many times to give Jing Yuan the position of crown prince.

I had been sincere, but Jing Yuan had thought I did this out of suspicion of him. He earnestly declined.

Grand Tutor Liu and my mother both said before my father the emperor that he must install his eldest son as crown prince as an example to later ages.

But when my father passed away, the night I ascended the throne, my mother and Grand Tutor Liu had me rendered unconscious. When I awoke, I found myself in a stone prison.

At the time, that stone prison was utterly secret, with walls all around and only one small door. In that stone room, my mother, Grand Tutor Liu, and two other loyal courtiers assiduously counseled me to allow Prince Jin to take my place, because I wasn't suited to being emperor, as if my being emperor would lead to the demise of the Jing clan's empire.

I just didn't understand. When I wanted to give up being emperor, they didn't want me to. Now that the position was mine, they wanted to rob me of it. Why was this?

I knew that, even if I agreed, if I became Jing Yuan and Jing Yuan became emperor, I would still never know peace, would spend my whole life mistrusted.

I would be better off putting an end to it altogether. They could rest easy, and I would be free.

No one kept watch in the stone room. I was alone. I thought that Jing Yuan, my mother, and Grand Tutor Liu all secretly hoped I would do this.

My mother and Grand Tutor Liu had brought me Jing Yuan's clothes and told me to put them on if I agreed. The violet silk belt in the bundle had been a gift from me; Jing Yuan had laughed then, saying that it was long enough to wrap around twice, but because cutting a belt was bad luck, he had worn it doubled up. As it happened, it turned out to be just long enough for me to use now.

Suspended in the air, I really did think that this would be the end.

Only, I hadn't counted on it being true that a hanged ghost cannot reincarnate. Dying was easy, but after my death, I had my full share of torment. Had I known beforehand, I would rather have lived out my life as Prince Jin and experienced decades of a living hell.

Inhabiting Jing Weiyi, after leaving the prison, I found that the empire was indeed well-governed. Had I been emperor back then, perhaps it would not be as prosperous as it was today.

If the world is like a game of weiqi, then I must be a piece doomed to be abandoned for the sake of the overall strategy; that was indeed a grievance I could not swallow.

The ever-loving and tender mother who had given birth to me and raised me, the grand tutor who had always painstakingly counseled me on how to be a wise ruler, and Jing Yuan, who when we were little had been as inseparable from me as body from shadow—all their actions had been falsehoods.

Was there any sincere kindness in this world?

Now it seemed that there was, but I had never met it.

Actually, I didn't know what the aftermath of using wine infused with peach wood to force me from Jing Weiyi's body would be.

I had slipped outside of Jing Weiyi's body. I felt myself about to drift apart.

Weariness and confusion stole over me.

Whether I would turn to utter nothingness or wake in the Yellow Springs, I did not know.

If there is a next life, I hope there is someone in the painting with me, someone to paint with me.

Extra Ghost Emperor

I.

I huddled in a dark corner, feeling deeply hurt.

How could an emperor like us, the mighty true Emperor Taizong… despite having filled the position only for one day… how could I be so miserable?

Miserable when I was alive, and still miserable now as a ghost.

A steady drizzle came down: a perfect match for my feelings.

That bowl of peach-branch water had been awfully potent. It had nearly turned my soul to shreds, and it was only with the force of my discontented resentment that I had hung on and burst into this little compound.

This was an abandoned residence with conflict ahead, murder behind, and ruin within. A scholar tree stood in the yard, and a well. It really was as bleak and inauspicious as ever a mortal residence was. If the strength in the earth here were not so weak, it would have been a paradise for a resentful spirit like me. Although, if it were not for the weakness of the earth, I would have had no chance to occupy it.

I understood this. In the world of ghosts, it was also the strongest who triumphed. My soul was now maimed. Anything might happen if I encountered a powerful ghost.

On top of my spiritual wound, my heart was even more deeply wounded. In what tiniest particular were we inferior to that bumbling Jing Weiyi? Ransi had insisted on driving me out… now I no longer believed in love.

I crouched in the darkest, stillest corner of the dilapidated house. It was hot, and the sun was fierce. I actually began to miss the imperial prison. At least it had been cold and dark there.

At night I began to move around weakly, searching for something I could absorb in this house. I required nourishment.

I lay beside the well under the towering scholar tree and absorbed a bit of yin energy. I felt much better. But for some reason, since going outside just now, I had

felt that something was following me.

Though I had no body now, I still felt a faint chill. Perhaps we were not the only ghost in this house.

I left the well and floated deliberately in the direction of the chill. The feeling was unsteady, now near, now far, always behind me.

Did it want to swallow me to increase its own strength, or…

When I reached the door, I whipped around and saw a spot of dim light dart behind a pillar.

Oh? It didn't seem to be stronger than me. I approached bit by bit and said, with composure, "Come out, I've seen you."

I sensed no movement from behind the pillar, so I floated over and spied a point of dim light clinging tightly to it. The light was very weak, as if it might go out any moment.

It was a little wandering spirit, the kind so weak that it couldn't even maintain its outward appearance in life and was on the verge of fading away.

I relaxed. Sternly, I asked it, "Can you understand what I'm saying?"

The little spirit moved, indicating that it did.

Then I asked, "When you were alive, were you human, or an animal?"

It moved again, drawing the character "human" in the air.

With their soul in such a miserable state, it went without saying that this person had lived just as bitter a life as ours, or perhaps even more so.

Next, I asked, "Are you a man or a woman? Were you young or old when you died? Did you live in this house? Why have you become a wandering spirit?"

It didn't move, instead hanging dimly before me. Perhaps I had asked too many questions and it couldn't answer.

For some reason, seeing this ghost that was even more wretched than myself, I felt a lot better. I sighed and said, "Well, you and I are both solitary wandering ghosts. I won't use you as nourishment."

A night breeze blew by, carrying the faint sound of the suona horn. I perked up. Was a funeral being held? Perhaps I could pick up some leftovers.

As I floated in the direction of the horns and drums, I looked back and found that damaged soul behind me, floating at a distance of three paces.

I felt a trace of sympathy. Whoever this was, in life it had been a citizen of this empire. We had never had a chance to show the people our benevolence in life. We could not abandon it now that we were a ghost.

So I said to it, "Come over here."

The little ghost's dim light glowed. It quickly floated over and stuck to my side.

When we left the house, I looked back at the gate. A placard lay beside the door, broken in half. Beneath the cobwebs and the dust, two large characters were still faintly legible—Meng House.

II.

The person the funeral was being held for was an old lady, a very amiable one. The little ghost and I couldn't win against the other powerful spirits. We had to hang back in a corner and wait until they were done eating. The old lady blew incense ashes toward us, past the boundary of her exclusive use. Smiling, she said to us, "Go ahead and eat."

I wasn't concerned about my dignity now. I wolfed down the ashes.

The little ghost wouldn't eat at first. I pushed the ashes toward it, indicating that I'd had enough, and finally it gobbled them up.

The old lady was watching us. "My, are you two brothers? It's so nice to see a little brother letting his big brother go first."

I was startled and said, "Of course not. We just met."

The old lady was very sympathetic toward our circumstances. She asked, "Why wouldn't two little things like you go reincarnate? Don't you have any family to give you offerings?"

Actually, I was much older than her, but of course I couldn't admit my identity. It was too humiliating. I said vaguely, "It's a long story."

"What a pity for such things to happen to someone so young. If you get the chance, find yourselves a good family to be reborn into."

I wanted that, but the underworld wouldn't take a ghost like me. "I'm a hanged ghost," I said sourly. "It's not so easy to reincarnate."

The old lady was appalled. "How could that be? You're so young. What happened to make you do that?"

"You might say it was outside of my control," I said helplessly.

"Do you mean," said the old lady in surprise, "that you're children of the Meng family?"

I shot a sharp glance at the little ghost next to me and shook my head. "No, though the yin energy in that house is very strong."

The old lady said, "Alas, that's no surprise. The former owner's great-grandfather was an honest official who offended someone, and that person took revenge. In a

single night, the whole family was killed. This happened many years ago. The killers were caught later, and the family must have gone to reincarnate. They had other relatives, but they never dared to touch the house, just let it fall apart."

The little ghost quietly stuck to me, the light of its soul very dim.

The old lady's time in the land of the living was coming to an end. The underworld official coming for her would be here soon. We said goodbye to her.

She gave us many of her offerings and said to me, "I hear that a hanged ghost only needs to find the rope you hanged yourself with and burn it. Release the resentment in your heart, and you can reincarnate. It's hard drifting in the land of the living. You should reincarnate soon."

Back at the Meng house, I wanted to rest, but I couldn't calm my emotions.

I no longer had resentment in my heart. Only fate was to blame. If my fate weren't bad, how could I have failed to win Ransi's heart even as a ghost?

The rope I had used to hang myself had been lost and rotted away, but my soul still couldn't go to the underworld. Clearly you couldn't rely on folktales.

The little ghost lay quietly beside me. When I saw it, my emotions leveled. I stroked it and asked, "Are you really the wronged ghost of one of the Meng family who can't reincarnate?"

It didn't move. I said, "Whoever you are, you can stay with me from now on. If you're a good ghost, maybe you'll have a chance to reincarnate."

The little ghost's light glowed dimly. It pressed close to my chest.

We lay together in a nook in the house. My heart slowly calmed. I thought of the past. If we hadn't been born into the imperial family, perhaps a-Yuan and I would have remained on good terms all our lives.

When we were very little, he was just like this little ghost, always sticking to me.

As children, I was more robust than a-Yuan. I fought my way out of the womb ahead of him. He was a picky eater, rail thin, always getting sick. I ate anything and everything, and I was bigger than him. Father always liked me and didn't have much time for him. My brother was taciturn, sitting alone in his room. He only went out to play when I invited him, and he didn't play with anyone else.

I was the older brother. I had to protect him. When my father awarded me anything, I gave him a share. We ate at the same table, slept in the same bed. But when we got older, he slowly opened up. He liked riding and archery and hunting. I, meanwhile, became lazier and lazier. I dallied with painting and calligraphy. I didn't want to learn martial arts, and my physique became inferior to his.

Then, when we were older still, I officially became crown prince and moved into the Eastern Palace, and he didn't come to see me often anymore. I didn't think there should be any distance between brothers, so I often invited him to see me and went to visit him.

The Eastern Palace had a cool chamber built above a pond. In summer I often played weiqi with a-Yuan there. Beside us was a glass cauldron of melons, a tribute from Tibet, kept cold with ice. When we were tired, we slept on a bamboo couch. At times like that, I really did think that our relationship was the same as before.

Alas, recalling the past made me feel all the more melancholy.

The little ghost moved. After eating the offerings, its soul light had brightened. I chatted with it: "When you were alive, did you have brothers and sisters?"

It still couldn't speak.

I joked with it: "I don't know whether you were a man or a woman when you were alive. If you were a woman and we weren't ghosts, you'd have to marry me now."

It didn't move. It must have been a man.

III.

When I recovered a little more energy, late at night while everyone was sleeping, I went to Qincai Alley to see Ransi.

Ransi wasn't asleep yet. He was much thinner, his face haggard. He lit incense and burned paper money in the courtyard. Many pastries were set on the table. They must all have been for me.

I was very gratified.

I made a breeze to ruffle the paper money. It flew up and down. I wondered whether he would understand I was here.

He said softly, "Zishu, if you're still here, hurry up and reincarnate."

I felt a stabbing pain in my heart. It was only sympathy he felt for me.

I silently took the stack of offerings away. I had planned to save up my energy and come to Ransi in a dream, to renew our connection for the future. But it looked like there was no need for that.

These offerings were much better than the ones the old lady had given us, but I couldn't bring myself to swallow them.

The little ghost hung silently beside me. Perhaps it was wondering why I wasn't eating, so I told it sadly, "The person I went to see just now is the man I love."

The little ghost trembled violently. This was the first time it had made such an intense display. I said, "I know, that's called being a cutsleeve. I'm not actually a cutsleeve. Before I died, I liked women. It's just that after becoming a ghost, recently, I accidentally fell in love with him."

The little ghost's light flashed urgently. I patted it. "But he doesn't love me. I wanted to steal the body of the person he loves, but I didn't manage it. Alas—"

I gave a rough account of my attempt to steal Jing Weiyi's body, leaving out my name and identity.

The little ghost's light flickered, now bright, now dim. I reassured it, "Don't worry, it's just an accident that I fell in love with him. I'm not the kind of cutsleeve who falls for every man he sees. So even if you're a man, there's no need to be scared."

The little ghost made a circle in midair, then threw itself against my shoulder.

"I'm glad you're not scared of me," I said joyfully.

Thinking back on our life, there hadn't been time to like any woman very much.

I'd heard that Grand Tutor Liu's granddaughter was getting ready to become our empress, but sadly I had never laid eyes on her.

When I was crown prince, there was a palace maid I liked well enough; she had been quite pretty, with a waist so slender it didn't make an armful. She was beautiful when she danced.

I paid her a few visits, but later a-Yuan said he liked her, and she seemed to like him more, so I gave her to him. But after that, I felt inexplicably unhappy. My enthusiasm had been at a low ebb that night. I must have loved her a little.

All the people around me had been strong characters then. Perhaps it was because of this that I liked good-tempered people…

Alas. My thoughts turned inadvertently to Ransi again, and that tragic love between man and ghost. My heart ached fiercely. The little ghost gently touched my face. I rubbed its head and returned to the Meng house with it.

IV.

When we entered the Meng house, I felt a sudden gust of dank wind. A ball of white mist shot toward us and snarled, "You dare take my house! I won't let you get away with it this time!"

I was momentarily stunned. This was another ghost, a boy of fifteen or sixteen, his hair hanging loose. Had his features not been contorted with rage, he would have been quite handsome. Waves of violence rolled off him.

The little ghost leaped in front of me, hovered, and was instantly locked in battle with the boy.

My companion had no human form, but its bravery surpassed my expectations. It kept hitting, hitting, hitting, and the ghost boy was actually driven to retreat in the face of its attack. But its light was dimming. I was a little worried. When it had sent the boy reeling, I grabbed hold of it and gave it some of my yin energy. I said to the boy, "You say I took your house. Who are you?"

"So sanctimonious, even as a ghost," the boy spat viciously. "Naturally, my name is Meng. This is my house. You told it to come here and take over my house, nearly beat part of my soul out of me, and you're still asking who I am?"

I understood. This boy was the remaining member of the Meng family. The little ghost wasn't part of the family. It had only fought him off and occupied this place.

That would explain why the little ghost didn't even have a human form. It must have expended too much of its strength fighting over territory with this boy.

I patted it on the head helplessly. *I didn't expect you to be such a quarrelsome ghost.*

The boy could no longer fight, so he switched to a verbal attack. "You dirty fornicators! How disgusting! Shameless even in death!"

I was enraged. Never in my experience, while I lived or during my many years as a ghost, had anyone dared to act so intemperate before me.

"We are merely chance acquaintances. Don't talk nonsense."

The boy pursed his lips. "You two died together, and even as ghosts, you still won't admit you're a couple! Gutless wonders! Cowards! Hypocrites!"

The little ghost struggled violently in my grip. I was burning with anger. "A commoner with a poison tongue, and you're blind. No wonder you were slaughtered. You can't even tell a new ghost from an old one? How exactly did you decide we were cutsleeve lovers who died for passion?"

My love for Ransi was exclusive.

The boy snorted. "Your two souls are connected. Unless your bodies were together in death, there's no way…"

He looked at me, and his gaze sharpened. "I have it! You're awfully ruthless! Awfully shameless! He died for you, and you're still using him to strengthen your own soul!"

The little ghost struggled out of my hold and went slamming toward the boy's face.

As the boy dodged, he shouted, "Wake up! Why are you still helping a loathsome brother like him… Ow…"

The boy was sent flying into the old tree. I came forward and grabbed the little ghost. "Who are you?" I asked calmly.

V.

The little ghost trembled in my hold and slowly began to change.

I watched him appear bit by bit before me, his transparent form slowly revealing his features.

It was like looking at myself in a mirror.

He was silent but staring at me, just the same as when we were little and I went out with others and didn't bring him.

I heard him call to me quietly: "Ge…"

I grabbed hold of him and gave him a violent shake. "What happened to you?! Weren't you Taizong?! Haven't you been receiving incense from the Imperial Ancestral Temple?! Shouldn't you have died in bed of old age surrounded by children and grandchildren?! How could you have become a wandering ghost?! What the hell happened!"

The ghost boy hugged a tree branch and watched us raptly. I didn't care anymore whether I was humiliating myself.

He was still looking at me in just the same way. Quietly, he said, "Ge, it's typical of you not to have read any history books after being out here this long. Liu Tongyi didn't tell you either… Taizong was Jing Mu."

A vision appeared before me of the toothless, snot-nosed little radish in the virtuous consort's arms.

I heard myself scream, "How could it be him! Then what were you!"

"I was the Crown Prince of Reverent Lamentation and Respectful Piety, by Imperial Grace," he said. "A little different from you. You were the Crown Prince of Solemn Virtue and Brave Persistence, by Imperial Grace. We were buried together."

The ghost boy on the branch gasped. "I know, I know! Our first emperor's twin sons, who unexpectedly died together and never had the fortune to be emperor! So it's you two! Ah, you're cutsleeves? Did the ministers of the time discover your incestuous affair? Did you die for love? Oh, so that's the truth behind the history

books! How awful!"

Jing Yuan said softly, "So it turns out you always thought that I took your throne, Ge. That's the kind of person you think I am…"

The boy kept shouting: "Wow, what a speech! Could it get any more maudlin!"

I heard my voice shaking. I thought that if a gust of wind had come along, it would have blown me to pieces.

"What… what the hell happened…"

"Ge, I told you, wherever you go, I'll follow. Why didn't you ever believe me?"

Jing Yuan had never called me "Imperial Brother"; it was always the less formal "Ge." Later, when I became crown prince, he still called me that, until one day, a eunuch said, *It is a little improper for Prince Jin to use this form of address*, and he switched to calling me "Imperial Brother." But when no outsiders were present, he still called me "Ge."

"After you became crown prince, you went away from me. I know you doubted me. You went to our imperial father and said you wanted to give up the position of crown prince in my favor, and I thought that if you didn't have a little brother like me, you'd have nothing to worry about… I wouldn't study those essays on military strategy. I only learned riding and fighting. I thought that, when you were emperor, I could go to the border…"

Jing Yuan had told me that he wanted to go to the frontier. I had just mentioned to my imperial father that I wanted to give up the position of crown prince when a-Yuan came to the Eastern Palace to see me, and told me what he was planning.

It surprised me a little. I was worried I'd made trouble for him by wanting to give up the position of crown prince. I quickly said, "The frontier is eighteen thousand li from the capital. Why would you want to go there? If you're there, I won't have anyone to play weiqi with."

"There are plenty of good weiqi players," he said. "Can't one of them play with you, Imperial Brother?"

"You really know how to shut me up," I said. "If I liked playing with other people, why would I always be asking you?"

The corners of a-Yuan's mouth tilted up. "Then I won't go. I'll stay here and play weiqi with you. When you find someone else to play with, I'll go to the frontier."

That night, he slept in the Eastern Palace again.

When we got up in the morning, I dropped his belt on the floor, and a jade button on it broke. I gave him my belt, but he said it bore the motif of the crown

prince, and he didn't dare wear it. I managed to dig up a belt from before I was crown prince for him to use.

Later, I had a new belt made for him, precisely the one I used to hang myself.

I kept shaking Jing Yuan. "Didn't Mother get rid of me so you could be emperor? Why did you also become a ghost? Why did you let the virtuous consort's radish walk off with the throne?"

Jing Yuan said quietly, "When Mother told me about her plan, I thought she and Old Man Liu had gone around the bend. But as long as I was alive, I would always bring you disaster, so before I went to the palace, I drank poison. I wanted to see you one last time…"

But I was already a hanged ghost then.

We really were a miserable pair of brothers.

Bitterly, I said, "How could you be so stupid? How could I kill you for the sake of that wretched throne? Couldn't you wait to make a decision until you'd seen me?"

Jing Yuan laughed. "Didn't you also not believe that I would never usurp your position? Why couldn't *you* wait to make a decision until you'd seen me? We're as bad as each other."

I was speechless.

Yes, we really were a pair of simpleminded brothers.

Mother had thought she was the smartest woman in creation, but she had given birth to two stupid sons, and finally the virtuous consort, whom she had such contempt for, became empress dowager. She must have died of rage.

Jing Yuan said, "Mother's early death *was* in large part caused by her anger about what happened with us. When she passed away, I hid in a little cranny in the palace, lest her ghost find me and come to settle the score. She did want to settle the score with both of us, but the official from the underworld stopped her. She was meant to be on a different road from us. I wanted to go to the imperial prison to find you, but I couldn't get in, and you couldn't get out. I had to wait outside for you. Finally, you possessed Jing Weiyi's body and left, and I followed you, but you were inside a physical body, and you couldn't see me…"

He looked so hurt. I couldn't help stroking the top of his head.

Though it had been very dull for me all those years in the imperial prison, a-Yuan had been outside all that time, hiding from the sun, hiding from all kinds of spiritual practitioners. He must have had it worse than me.

"There, there. Now that we've been reunited, we don't have to be afraid of anyone."

Jing Yuan immediately drew close and stood pressed against me.

The boy lay on the tree branch and said with feeling, "What great fortune the two of you were never emperor, or else the empire would be in ruins!"

I glared at him. "We would have been a wise ruler, and it is certainly out of the question for a-Yuan to have been otherwise!"

We definitely couldn't have done worse than the virtuous consort's radish. At least we wouldn't have had descendants as hopeless as Jing Weiyi!

VI.

I lay inside sleeping, pondering the future.

The years-long resentment had been resolved. Might Jing Yuan and I still be fit to go to the underworld or reincarnate?

Only, after we reincarnated, we would forget everything that had come before. Perhaps he and I wouldn't be brothers again. We wouldn't know each other in the next life. We wouldn't remember anything.

As I dozed, I suddenly felt something icy approach my mouth, something bearing a peculiar and immense power.

My eyes flew open. I saw Jing Yuan holding the piece of jade that had once been in Jing Weiyi's mouth, trying to put it in mine.

I batted his hand away. "So that's what that boy meant when he said I was using you to strengthen my own soul."

The jade contained Jing Yuan's spiritual energy. He was already completely transparent. He said, "Ge, I've been a wandering ghost for so many years. My soul is damaged, I might not be able to reincarnate. The underworld won't take me. If you eat this, I can be with you forever. We ought to have been one person to begin with."

I was furious. "Hasn't being a ghost straightened out your head yet? You and I are two people. How could we become one? You want me to consume your spiritual energy, then watch as my own little brother turns to dust?"

Jing Yuan looked at me. "Ge, even if we go to the underworld and reincarnate, we'll have none of our memories from this life. If you don't remember me and I don't remember you, I don't think it will be any different from turning to dust."

I punched him in the head. “There’s a big difference. Even if you don’t remember me and I don’t remember you, we might still meet again. That’s still better than nothing. Anyway, how can you be sure that we won’t remember each other?”

I snatched away the piece of jade and dropped it so it broke in two. Jing Yuan shuddered. Spiritual energy poured out, and he looked normal again.

I gave him one piece of jade and kept one for myself.

“This is an ancient spiritual jade. If we take it with us when we go to the underworld, maybe we can keep some of our memories. In the future, if you and I reincarnate and match these pieces of jade, we’ll remember that we were brothers in this lifetime.”

Later, Jing Yuan and I, and the Meng boy, were gathered in by an official and taken to the underworld.

The Meng boy’s revenge was already complete, but he had still felt some discontentment, so he had lingered in the land of the living, unable to enter the underworld.

“But now I’m over it! Emperor Taizong was even more unlucky than me! Why should I keep brooding? I want to reincarnate! And have a wonderful new life!”

I stood on the Naihe Bridge and saw him heroically slurp down a big bowl of Meng Po Soup.[17] He waved easily to me and Jing Yuan. “I hope to see you in the next life!”

I waved back at him. “See you in the next life.”

“See you in the next life.” I repeated the words, this time to Jing Yuan.

I had no idea whether that piece of jade would let me remember this life.

I brought the Meng Po Soup up to my mouth.

Living and dead, everything I had experienced appeared before my eyes. At last I understood the saying—all is empty.

Obsession, resentment, attachment. Everything that went into a life—at the end of it—was empty.

So why should there be another life?

I didn’t understand.

But I wanted another life.

I wanted to see whether, in my next life, I would still remember Jing Yuan.

VII.

Teacher said to me that if I dared to make a-Gui do my homework for me again, he would make me copy the *Analects* a hundred times.

I knew it had to be Mu Qin who'd squealed.

He was only a year older than me, and always pretending to be obedient to win our parents' favor. Perhaps it was like Grandmother said, and we had been enemies in a past life.

If so, I must have owed him money.

I wasn't going to pay attention to him. Everyone who put on airs like this was a hypocrite. Ignoring him, as I was doing, was the conduct of a true man.

Today my two Uncles Wan came to visit and finally rescued me from Teacher's monstrous clutches.

I like Little Uncle Wan best. He's friendly, and handsome, and he smells nice, and always gives me rare toys. Mu Qin said moodily to our father, "Mu Ling loves Little Uncle Wan so much, Father should just give him to Little Uncle Wan to be his son instead."

Little Uncle Wan said, "That won't do. Wan Ling doesn't sound as nice as Mu Ling."

Eldest Uncle Wan and Little Uncle Wan also took me onto their ship to play.

Their ship had everything. It was even better than my house. And the serving girls were prettier than at home.

I asked Little Uncle Wan, when there were so many pretty girls, why didn't he have a wife yet?

Little Uncle Wan said, "It's precisely because there are too many pretty girls. If I marry one, I won't be able to look at the rest, or touch them."

That made a lot of sense.

But when Little Uncle Wan said it, he was smiling. When he smiled, he was much more beautiful than those serving girls, and I thought that he was just saying it to tease me.

Little Uncle Wan took me up on deck to play too. Next to us, a ship approached the shore. In one of the ship's windows, I saw two people talking.

I thought one of them looked familiar.

Little Uncle Wan suddenly let go of my hand, turned, and went back into the hold. He had been in a rush to leave.

I didn't leave. I kept staring at that familiar person. He seemed to sense me looking at him, and looked back. He was probably the same age as Little Uncle Wan.

When I saw him, I thought of ink wash paintings of immortals in flowing robes, handsome, and also somehow close.

I smiled at him and waved. He smiled back at me. Then the person he was talking to went to the window and closed the window sash.

That night, I slept over on the ship. Little Uncle Wan seemed to be in a bad mood. He sat by himself in a dark little room and drank a lot of wine, and he didn't let the beautiful girls come keep him company.

The next morning, Little Uncle Wan still didn't leave his room. I ran up on deck, hoping to see that ship and that familiar man again.

But all I saw was the butt of a ship. It had already left.

I went back inside in a huff, had breakfast, and went home.

Maybe it was an unlucky year for me. When we were almost at the gate, a sedan carrier fell, and I fell too, out of the sedan.

I limped out and stood up. The carriers were arguing with the sedan that had bumped us.

That sedan seemed to belong to the family that had just moved into the house next door, so my family's steward and their steward were trying to smooth over the argument, saying that this incident shouldn't interfere with a friendship between new neighbors.

As I stood there watching, the piece of jade around my neck suddenly fell.

I bent down to pick it up, but someone else's hands picked it up for me.

It was a little fellow about the same age as me. He smiled at me. The way he looked at me seemed incredibly familiar.

Around his neck was a piece of jade like mine.

He handed me the piece of jade and asked, "What's your name, Ge?"

Extra Intoxicated

I.

It was the sixth month, with summer rain streaming down.

I sat at the window, looking at the lake-colored mists outside with an inexpressible feeling wreathing my heart.

Ransi and I had been together two or three years.

We had been doing pretty well.

Ransi had an excellent character. He never rushed or became restless in anything he did. It was only now that we were together that I was finding we had quite a lot of preferences in common.

We both liked salty and spicy foods, and traveling around to take in the sights. That my father-in-law was the Scholar of the Red Leaves of the Western Hills, I later learned as well.

I read all the secret unpublished manuscripts. Old Grand Tutor Liu really had been an unusual person. Despite being such a stuffy old man, he had fathered a son like my father-in-law, and that had led to Ransi, a treasure I hardly deserved.

Ransi and I lived like this in the fullness of conjugal affection. But perhaps man has an inherent weakness that leads him to be just a little unsatisfied…

I thought that my and Ransi's life together was too smooth, so smooth there were no waves… as if something were missing.

For example, if I wanted hotpot for lunch, he would say he also wanted it.

If he said he didn't want to go out today, by coincidence, I also wouldn't feel like moving.

For another example, in doing certain things, he wouldn't protest, regardless of time or place. He wouldn't say a gazebo wasn't private enough, and we might be seen. He wouldn't complain that the slope of a hill was too dirty, wouldn't push me away and say the courtyard was too cold at night, couldn't we go inside…

It was perfect harmony between us from start to finish. I asked him whether I had gone overboard, and he never said anything.

He calmly bathed with me, calmly slept, and remembered to pick up scattered articles of clothing and put them back in place, neatly folded. He calmly let me hold him, and the next morning, calmly got up.

In short, it was just that, moment to moment, he was always so calm…

I deliberately went to disturb him while he was busy with work.

I snatched away his ledger and brush, and he didn't push me away, didn't tell me to settle down. He didn't even frown, only moved the inkstone, teacup, and so on from his desk, and then I could do whatever I wanted…

Afterward, he straightened his clothes, put everything back in its place, and sat back down at his desk, as if he'd just had a cup of tea.

I asked him indirectly, *Ransi, do you find that there's anything wrong with me*?

And he smiled and said, *No.*

I asked, *Really? I have many bad habits.*

He said, *I think I have many myself, so I don't feel you have especially many.*

So I stopped asking and felt even more lonesome.

Liu Tongyi, Liu Tongyi. Perhaps a problem had arisen when he was given a name that sounded like "agree"; he would never say, "I don't agree."

When he liked something, he wouldn't eat very much of it.

And when he didn't like something, he wouldn't eat very little of it.

He rose at the Hour of the Rabbit and went to bed at the second watch of the night.

He ate plain porridge in the morning and drank weak tea at night.

I thought that, in his eyes, perhaps I was that bowl of thin porridge in the morning, that cup of weak tea at night.

I had never even seen him drunk.

Ransi said he couldn't hold his liquor. He became drunk very easily.

Every time I maliciously induced him to drink, after a cup or two, he would always put his cup down and say, *I really can't drink any more.*

Then he would keep eating.

Today at midday, it was the same.

I sat by the window awhile, then went to take a midday nap.

I closed my eyes and recalled the past.

A person was most likely to reveal his true nature when he was drunk.

When Chu Xun was drunk, he cried. As he cried, he laughed, and asked me, *Your Highness, tell me, what am I*?

I said, *You are my a-Mi, nothing else.*

And he laughed louder.

When Yun Yu was drunk, he tended to sleep. He became irascible if I told him to go lie down. When I'd tried to help him to bed, he'd even torn my robe.

Even Qizhe had once been drunk in front of me.

He clung to me and said, *Uncle, actually, we are miserable.*

I said, *I know. How can you be emperor and not miserable*? Then a young palace eunuch and I together moved heaven and earth to coax him into bed.

And the next day I couldn't be left in peace. I had to be summoned.

"Last night we drank with you, Imperial Uncle, and seem to have become intoxicated. We do not remember anything."

I said very confidently, "I was also drunk and do not remember anything either. If I forgot myself, I hope Your Majesty will forgive me."

Finally, a trace of a smile appeared on my imperial nephew's face, and he turned the page.

But even so, it was still better than Liu Tongyi not getting drunk even once.

I, Jing Weiyi, was not normally stubborn about anything, but once stubbornness came over me, I had to follow through.

That afternoon, I went to walk through the market, and really did run across something.

An old foreign man with a pole over his shoulder was selling a kind of wine that was supposed to be a secret recipe from his country. I tried some. It tasted about the same as freshly tapped coconut milk, but apparently the aftereffects were very strong. A grown man who could easily drink a whole jar of wine would be down after five cups.

I was delighted and took out a silver ingot. "I'll take all the wine you have, sir."

II.

That evening, I had dinner laid out in the outer chamber of the bedroom. I dismissed our attendants, leaving only myself and Ransi seated across from each other.

"You've been busy with discussions all day," I said. "For dinner I procured a few nice dishes, and at the market, I happened to run into a foreign kind of fruit drink that tastes much like coconut milk. They say it's wine, but I've tasted it, and it's hardly alcoholic. You don't like wine. Try this and see if it's to your taste?"

Ransi took the glass bowl of "coconut milk" and tasted it. I asked him, "Is it good?"

He smiled. "How rare to be able to taste fresh coconut milk here."

Against my conscience, I said, "I know you like coconuts, so I bought a whole load. There's plenty, drink up."

Ransi smiled again and said nothing, only cast down his eyes and drank the coconut milk.

Seeing his smile and his gaze, I felt a sudden twinge of guilt.

No, I couldn't go soft. I only wanted to see what Ransi was like when he wasn't calm. This was to make our lives more interesting, to increase our affection and harmony.

I imagined what Ransi would be like when he was drunk and no longer calm, as well as how he would be afterward in my embrace… The room heated up at once. My heart danced like a candle flame.

Naturally, Ransi didn't notice my passions. He put down the glass bowl and began to eat.

I had deliberately put a spicy dish in the position where he often picked up food. It had been made with plenty of the recently delivered spicy sauce. Even someone with a tolerance for spicy food would probably find the flavor a little too much.

As expected, after he ate a mouthful, he immediately picked up the bowl of coconut milk and drank a bit.

"Is this dish too spicy?" I asked. "Have some of the vegetables." I added a green lotus bun with boiled cabbage to his plate.

When he ate it, his brow furrowed slightly. I ate some right after him and hypocritically said, "Why is it so salty?"

So he drank another swallow.

I served him salted steamed chicken, river snails in chili oil, Yunnan ham in sauce… My hand shook slightly as I served him. Had it been someone less good-tempered than Ransi, they would probably have pushed their bowl away and asked me, "Is it the cook trying to salt me to death or you?"

But not Ransi. He only asked, "Why are the flavors a little heavy today?"

Shamelessly, I said, "Oh, perhaps Old Meng got drunk and overdid the seasonings."

Ransi didn't say anything else, only drank more and more. I had hoped he would be drunk after a few swallows, but instead he finished the whole bowl.

Once he was done, he put the glass bowl aside and began to eat porridge.

I studied him inconspicuously and found that his manner was perfectly normal. He seemed as collected as usual and no different.

Had that old foreign man lied to me?

But I'd tried it on a couple of pages that afternoon, and after half a bowl of the same size, they had been under the table.

So was Ransi's alcohol tolerance actually better than I imagined?

Was it just impossible for him to get drunk?

As I was pondering this, a fly that had flown in buzzed over the table and started circling.

Ransi looked up and frowned slightly. A cold draft brushed past my face.

Thunk! The fly was pinned to the wall behind me by a chopstick.

I turned my head stiffly. I looked at the chopstick, then at Ransi.

"You… you…"

Ransi looked at me. The corners of his lips tipped up slightly. "What, you want to ask whether I'm drunk?"

I was a little muddled. I could only smile. "How… do you know martial arts?"

Ransi calmly picked up a handkerchief and wiped his mouth. "I read a lot of books when I was little and wanted to put what I read into practice. I trained for a bit."

He picked up an empty bowl from the table and pulled it apart. *Snap.* The bowl turned into two neat halves. The break was smooth.

He smacked the corner of the table. *Crunch.* It broke off.

The room became even hotter. My robe stuck to my back.

"I've never seen you use these skills…"

He patted the arm of his chair. *Thwap-thwap.* The arm splintered into pieces. "I trained after drinking wine in secret. I can only use these skills when I'm drunk, so I don't dare to become intoxicated."

I recalled that my father-in-law had written a book about a drunken hero. I guessed that was the origin of Ransi's martial arts training…

"Oh?" I said. "It seems this coconut milk… is more alcoholic than expected. If you're drunk, you should go to bed."

Ransi looked at me, his eyes unreadable. "Didn't you get me drunk on purpose tonight? Whatever you wanted to do, you can do it now."

Cold sweat dripped from me like rain.

Yes, I'd nearly forgotten. Ransi had once been chamberlain of the Court of Judicial Review…

I wiped my forehead. "Listen, Ransi, I just…"

He laughed. "I know, you've always thought I was very dull. I'm much too prim."

I said at once, "No, Ransi, I was only…"

He raised a hand. "Enough. You don't need to defend yourself. Actually, I've always thought that you and I weren't a good match, so I didn't know whether we ought to be together. But because I love you, time after time, I still turned back to find you… I knew you'd think I was prim and dull, but I still stayed with you…"

Something seemed to clench around my heart, then relax.

Ransi, he said he loved me…

He'd said that he loved me…

He stood, got out a piece of paper, and slapped it down in front of me. *Crack*. A gap opened in the table.

"This is Yun Yu's address. His and Wan Qianshan's whereabouts are unfixed, but every year during the seventh month, they go to this place to avoid the summer heat."

My heart chilled. I grabbed him by his sleeve. "Ransi…"

He sneered and cut me off before I could start. "Some things you make too much of for yourself. So what if Yun Yu is your nephew? Oh, haha, I know… The one you truly love is actually…"

I grabbed him. "I love you."

He stared intently at me and shook his head. "I don't believe you. You asked me if there was something wrong with you, but you didn't think the problem was with you. You thought it was me. I know our temperaments don't match. Happiness doesn't come by forcing it. You should go to the person who suits you best. What you think of as obstacles will cease to be once you've smashed them!"

Bang. Half the table collapsed. The plates, bowls, and cups came crashing to the ground. Fortunately, I had instructed the servants not to come in even if the sky fell.

My heart was breaking with regret.

Ransi, I thought the two of us were too good a match. I was just trying to make things more interesting. Why had these ancient scores come up again?

He sighed. “But I don’t understand. Why did you want to get me drunk tonight? Did you want to hear the truth from me? Now that I’ve said everything, let’s break it off.”

A cleaver stabbed me in the heart.

I’d had some of the “coconut milk” too. I was a little tipsy. My tongue couldn’t keep up. I threw my arms around him. “Unless I’m dead, don’t even think of breaking it off!”

He stared at me. “Why not?”

I didn’t want to defend myself anymore. Actions speak louder than words. I simply tore open his belt.

He laughed, and my robe tore. “Before breaking it off, I want to do something. Or else I’ll be losing out.”

Ransi and I ended up locked in a fierce, biting kiss. I wasn’t sure who had initiated it.

From the outer chamber, we made it into the bed. When all our clothes were gone and I was about to… the situation took a turn. Ransi scooped up the salve on the bedside table. His hand slowly traveled down my back…

I was astounded. “At *my* age… Great Hero Liu, why don’t we give the matter some further thought?”

Crack. A piece broke off the bed frame.

…

What happened after, I would rather not mention.

At any rate, in sum, afterward, with the very last breath remaining to me, I said to him, “Ransi, whether you believe it or not, I couldn’t live the rest of my life without you. If you want to kill me, all you have to do is leave me.”

He narrowed his eyes and looked at me. “Really?”

“If you don’t believe it, try and see what happens,” I said.

He shook his head. “You’ve always been all over the place. I really don’t dare to believe it.”

He struck the headboard. *Crack*. Another piece broke off the bed frame. "But I do."

III.

The next morning, when I stumbled out of bed, Ransi was in the outer chamber reading at the table. On the table was a steaming cup of tea. He stood. "You're awake? I've had breakfast prepared. It's nearly noon, but you should still eat some."

He was just the same as usual.

My head was splitting. I rubbed my temples.

"Last night, I had a strange dream. For some reason, I feel like I'm falling apart."

With a slight smile, Ransi asked, "Oh? What was the dream?"

As I recalled it, I shuddered. It was really too nonsensical. As gentle, good-tempered, and refined as Ransi was, how could he…

I put an arm around his waist and bent my head to give him a kiss. "Don't worry about it. It was just a silly dream."

A page came in bringing food. He was already used to my and Ransi's intimacy, and laid the table deftly. I sat down and gasped, instantly breaking out in cold sweat.

Ransi sat down beside me at the brand-new table. So gently, ever so gently, he said to me, "We'll have milder food for a couple of days. Just put up with it…"

He took a small vial from his sleeve. "Snow balm from the Healer's Hall. After we eat, I'll help you apply some…"

Crack. This time it was the bowl in my hand that shattered.

After we ate, I went to the rear courtyard and had the whole load of "coconut milk" poured out.

From that day forward, I did not dare to get Ransi drunk again.

Extra Sour Soup Noodles

I.

It was the third day of the last month and snowing heavily. I was drinking beside a stove in a felt tent in the style of the northwestern peoples.

A whole sheep roasted over the fire, sizzling and dripping with oil. Strong liquor burned in my throat. When I finished my cup, a foreign girl wearing a small pearl-studded hat immediately refilled it from a tin pot, smiling broadly, showing her teeth, her thin waist gently twisting. Certainly Han girls wouldn't behave like this.

I smiled in spite of myself. Her dense eyelashes fluttered, and she sat gracefully at my side. Just then, the tent flap was pulled aside, and Siquan barged in. Bending down, he whispered, "Sir, there's trouble at home. You must hurry back."

I was slightly surprised. Siquan made a vague sign with his hand—it was palace business.

I had no choice but to rise, put on a cloak, and leave the tent. The wind drove huge snowflakes into my face. If not for the felt carpet at my feet to prevent slipping and the houses visible all around, I really might have believed myself to be beyond the northern frontier.

Siquan glanced from side to side and quietly said, "Your Highness, there's someone from the palace waiting at the manor. He says His Majesty is refusing to eat."

If His Majesty wasn't eating, as a loyal subject, I couldn't enjoy a meal in peace either. This was what it meant to be a subject.

It was indispensable that, in spite of the heavy snow and slippery ground, I order the carriage to speed home with every appearance of great emergency. Wang You was pacing anxiously around the heated eastern hall, his face a picture of misery. "Your Highness is back at last. His Majesty is seriously ill and will not eat. The

imperial physicians and imperial kitchens can do nothing. Her Majesty the Empress Dowager ordered me to invite Your Highness to the palace."

When His Majesty wasn't eating, what use was it to come to me?

Though inwardly I grumbled, I still swiftly changed my clothes and followed Wang You to the palace.

In fact, His Majesty's illness was all the empress dowager's doing.

Recently, two provinces in the north had experienced catastrophic snowfalls. The refugees were freezing; the damage was extensive.

It was necessary for the court to swiftly allocate provisions and accelerate the construction of housing for the refugees.

But the empress dowager, who had a very high opinion of her own intelligence, thought that she must do something ostentatious to display her benevolence and virtue, so she said that His Majesty must have done something wrong to cause heaven to send this calamity. She had the emperor eat millet buns and pickled vegetables for ten days, and wouldn't let him eat his fill. Every day before going to court, before going to sleep, he had to spend a shichen kneeling and copying scripture to beg heaven's forgiveness.

How much time is there in one night? This was simply not letting the child sleep.

Qizhe had never been especially robust, and he had always been sensitive to cold. With the empress dowager tormenting him like this, unable to put on a fur-lined cloak, dressed only in a padded cotton robe when icicles hung from the eaves, his little face turned sickly pale. I couldn't stand it. Each time I saw him like that, I'd want nothing better than to give him a hot mantou and tell him it was all right if he ate a bit, but Qizhe would say to me with solemnity, "We must do this." Next thing I knew, someone would go report what I had said to the empress dowager, who would hint to Qizhe that I was interfering with His Majesty's sagacious actions, that I wanted to turn His Majesty into a libertine, self-indulgent ruler.

So I had left it alone.

While Qizhe was a child of the Jing family, he was the empress dowager's son before that, and I wasn't even his real uncle. What was it to me how she disciplined her son?

I simply stopped going to the palace to save myself pointless distress.

As anyone might have expected, Qizhe held out for six days, and then, after a heavy snowfall, fell ill.

He took a chill and ran a fever.

Now the empress dowager was anxious to pile blankets on top of her son, and she made the imperial kitchens prepare meat, but Qizhe categorically refused to eat it. He wouldn't even drink a single mouthful of hot broth.

When I arrived, the empress dowager was standing at Qizhe's bedside, sniffling. In the imperial sleeping quarters, heaters and braziers were lined up like a formation to exorcise demons. I removed my cloak, sweating profusely and on the point of getting heatstroke.

I was just about to kneel when the empress dowager sobbed, "You're family, Prince Huai, there's no need to kneel. His Majesty said he wanted to see his imperial uncle, so I sent for you… His Majesty… His Majesty… Go and see His Majesty now…"

The palace maids and eunuchs around us whimpered and wept along with the empress dowager, just as if my imperial nephew had already passed away.

I went to the bed. Qizhe was wrapped tightly in a brocade quilt, all but his head covered. His face was flushed. He said weakly to me, "Imperial Uncle…"

The empress dowager wept, "Don't move, son, careful not to get chilled!"

I violently suppressed the urge to rip off the quilt and carry my imperial nephew out to get some fresh air, then bent over the bed to pay my respects.

Qizhe said feebly, "You may dispense with formalities, Imperial Uncle… We… We…" He broke off coughing.

The empress summoned the imperial physician in a trembling voice. I asked tactfully, "Does His Majesty still have a chill?" He wasn't suffering from excessive internal heat?

The imperial physician felt his pulse, then responded, "His Majesty has recovered from his chill, but he will not eat a single meal. I have tried…"

I shot a glance sideways. There was a table covered in bowls and dishes.

Actually, Qizhe had eaten a couple of mouthfuls of porridge.

But that was all. He wouldn't touch anything else.

Again and again, the empress dowager pressed the imperial physician to prescribe a medicine to invigorate the spleen and improve the appetite. *We wouldn't be here now if you'd just let your son eat.*

I leaned down and said to Qizhe, "Your Majesty will not eat. Is that because none of the food from the imperial kitchens suits your taste? If there is something you wish to eat, tell me, and I will do all I can to obtain it."

I was merely asking this in accordance with the scene, but to my surprise, Qizhe's eyes opened wider, and he licked his lips. "Imperial Uncle… we… we suddenly

recalled… when we ate… those sour soup noodles…"

Oh? He remembered that?

I was taken aback.

The empress dowager threw herself forward. "Noodles? You want to eat noodles? What kind? I'll have the imperial kitchens prepare them at once! Prince Huai, what noodles does His Majesty want?"

Qizhe tossed inside his bedding and looked at me pitifully. "Imperial Uncle… the broth has to be vegetarian… We… we are fasting… We must abstain from meat…"

I felt heartsick. "Don't worry, Your Majesty, those noodles are served in vegetarian broth."

Qizhe's eyes lit up.

The empress dowager grabbed me and asked, "Chengjun, what noodles?"

I snatched my sleeve out of the empress dowager's claws and said, "I think the imperial kitchens really won't be able to recreate their authentic flavor. Permit me to go out to find someone to make them."

II.

I took Wang You and a few other eunuchs, changed into ordinary clothes, and rode a small carriage to River Snail Alley off Four Seasons Lane. By the small shopfront at the corner of the alley, the words Old Xue's Noodle Shop were obscured by snow, the strokes barely visible. Customers went in and out, and the shade was raised to release puffs of steam.

I let down the carriage curtain and said, "We're here."

Some years ago, when my mother was still living, and the emperor was still crown prince, when Qitan, Qili, and the whole crowd of children had first started coming to Huai Manor all the time, it was also the last month, shortly before the New Year, when the sky cleared after a snowfall. I had some free time and came to the market to walk around. I read some contemporary Spring Festival couplets, then stood for a bit at a stall that sold odds and ends. Suddenly, below the heads of the crowd, I saw a number of small heads racing toward the fireworks stall.

These were my imperial nephews, Qitan, Qifei, Qili… a whole string of them.

All at once, I understood why my mother had always thrashed me when I snuck out to wander around the market when I was little.

Looking at those racing children now, I also wanted to grab them and give them a thrashing.

With their little sable cloaks, their little jade pendants stitched with pearls, their little fur-lined boots, and their little witless faces, they were simply calling out to all the kidnappers in the world—here are some plump little lambs ready to hand, be sure not to pass them up.

Which moronic stewards had let these princes play around here!

There had to be guards keeping watch in secret, but weren't they worried about losing them?

Looking at those heads scurrying around, my heart skipped, and I nearly forgot that one of my legs was lame. I shot like an arrow toward the lantern stall and grabbed hold of Qili, who was at the head of the pack. He looked up and saw me, gave me a grin that was missing a front tooth, and stuck out his tongue. Qitan howled and threw himself at me, hugging my leg. "Little Uncle, Little Uncle, Uncle Jun, Uncle Jun, I want that lantern!"

"What are you all doing here?" I said sternly.

With a look of sophistication, Qili said, "Heh, there's people following us. If anything happens to us, their whole families will pay for it with their lives!"

"If anything happens," I said, "even if their whole families pay for it with their lives, it still won't get you back."

Chuckling, Qili said, "Yes, yes, Uncle, we know."

Qifei was a picture of innocence. "We're all being very good."

Qitan dangled desperately from my leg. "Uncle Jun—the lantern!"

My head was about to explode. As I got out my purse, Qifei suddenly gasped. "There… Over there…"

I looked where he was pointing and gasped as well.

Isn't that the crown prince...

Qitan ducked behind me. "Eunuch Wang is coming to catch me! I'm not going with him!"

Qili's mouth puckered.

Qifei looked at me and shook his head. "My big brother the crown prince didn't come with us."

The crown prince was accompanied by Wang You and two other important palace eunuchs. Of course he hadn't come with the rest of them.

Before I could work out what was happening, Wang You and the others guarding Qizhe had arrived in front of us. Qitan and Qifei immediately behaved, and Qili and

the others stepped back behind the two of them.

There were too many people around to speak openly. I could only bow and ask, "What are you doing here?"

Wang You said, "The family permitted it."

I couldn't help looking around. The whole street was full of ordinary passersby, and there was no way to know how many were genuine.

Smiling, Wang You said, "Since we've run into each other, the young master can walk around with his uncle."

Qizhe agreed. As he did so, he stood perfectly upright with his chest out. There was a clear distinction between him and Qitan and the others, who were leaning and slouching.

But could such a small child really be happy posturing like this?

Though Qili, Qifei, and the rest had often been told by the adults to get closer to the crown prince, children were children, after all. They couldn't have too much fun playing with the crown prince. When he was present, they had to restrain themselves. They'd come on a rare trip to the market, but now they couldn't enjoy themselves properly. They were a little dispirited.

Qitan stood pressed against my leg. He had stopped yelling, just kept tugging on my cloak with all his strength, telling me not to forget about his lantern because of his imperial brother.

I got out money and bought the fish lantern he'd had his eye on. Qitan instantly livened up. Holding up the new toy, he pranced around ebulliently. Wang You grinned and said, "Honestly, little young master, you have all kinds of marvelous things at home. But you like this thing instead."

Qitan wrinkled his nose. Qifei said, "With our eldest brother here, the first thing we buy ought to go to him."

Qitan immediately hugged the lantern, and Qizhe said, "No need; I do not want it. You play with it, little brother."

Then Qitan grinned and looked all around with the lantern under his arm. When he caught sight of a sugar-drop seller, he shook my leg again. "Uncle, that one!"

"You cannot eat those," said Wang You.

Qitan looked mulish. I said, "They're already here, let them have fun. I ate those when I was little. They're not dirty at all." I bought a bag of sugar drops. Wang You tasted one first, then let Qitan eat them. Qifei, Qili, and the rest all crowded around to snatch them. Qizhe still stood upright, not making a sound. I said, "Would you like to try one?"

Qizhe cast down his eyes. Wang You said, "The young master doesn't eat sticky things."

Qitan's belly was like a bottomless pit. He ate the sugar drops, then wanted a fruitcake. After he gobbled up the cake, he clamored for meatballs. When Qifei, Qili, and the others wanted to eat something, they didn't say so but prodded Qitan into asking for it too. As taster, Wang You was rubbing his belly.

Qizhe kept walking tidily forward, his attention undivided.

Wang You quietly said to me in admiration, "Have a look at that. Now *that* is conduct befitting a crown prince. He really is different."

I was just considering what answer to make when Qitan yelled, "Uncle, I want that red cake!"

The so-called red cake was a hawthorn jelly. Half jelly and half cake, it was a little cold to eat in winter, but Qitan wanted it, and even Wang You wasn't against it. "Eating a little is all right, and I can have a taste myself."

I bought the cake, and Wang You tasted it. I was just about to split it up for the children when I caught a glimpse of Qizhe still standing there unmoving, eyes fixed on the cake in my hands.

"Would you like to try it?" I said.

Qizhe said nothing, but he didn't cast down his eyes.

I said, "It's sweet and sour, but a little cold."

Qizhe kept looking.

I could only say, "Will you have a piece?"

Finally Qizhe cast down his eyes and said, "Very well."

Wang You passed a small piece to Qizhe, while the rest was snatched up by Qitan and the others.

Qizhe took the hawthorn cake and bit off a corner. He chewed it carefully, swallowed, then bit off more.

In the blink of an eye, he had eaten the whole cake.

I couldn't stop myself asking, "Does it suit your taste?"

Qizhe nodded, opened his mouth, and hiccupped.

III.

The crown prince's hiccupping was an event that might go nowhere or anywhere.

Wang You looked wretched, and I was at a loss.

The empress was too careful with her son; she had coddled him so much that a small piece of hawthorn cake could make him hiccup.

Qizhe was hiccupping nonstop. Wang You slapped himself in the face. "I ought to die. To let the young master eat a thing like that!"

I was the one who had bought the thing; when he slapped himself in the face, it was as good as slapping me.

But I didn't stop him.

I looked around. The sign for Old Xue's Noodle Shop was right in front of us. I said, "Come into the shop for some hot soup, young master. Wash it down, and you'll be fine."

Wang You looked at the shopfront and wrinkled his nose.

"I come to this shop often. You can relax."

Because it wasn't mealtime, there were hardly any customers in the shop.

Wang You, looking disdainful, wiped a big bench, then put down a mat, and only then invited Qizhe and my other imperial and royal nephews to sit.

Old Xue came out with a towel hanging around his neck. He looked at me and smiled. "What are you doing here at this time, young master?" Then he glanced at Qizhe and the others. "Hey, these have the look of little masters. You must have been married very young to have children this grown up, young master?"

"My nephews," I said. "This child ate something cold out in the street and got the hiccups. He wants some hot soup to drink."

Old Xue looked apologetic. "Young master, I'm sorry. The stock has all been sold. It's a good day for year-end purchases, and there are many people at the market. I sold out at midday. Why don't I make a bowl of sour soup and hand-pulled noodles?"

"That will do," I said.

Old Xue's shop was a place I had run across inadvertently. It was a small shopfront but very clean. Old Xue came from the area of Qinling, and the food in his shop was excellent. I had even hinted to my own cook that he should come and eat here, try to pick something up, but he couldn't produce the same flavors.

Old Xue went into the kitchen. Before long, he brought out a big bowl of noodles. It was steaming, redolent of sourness.

I had Old Xue bring out two small dishes, pretending it was to check whether it was too hot. It had to be ladled out and tasted before the crown prince could be

invited to partake.

Qizhe sipped a couple of mouthfuls of hot broth and finally stopped hiccupping, and Wang You looked as if an enormous weight had lifted from him.

Qitan looked longingly at me. Gulping, he said, "Uncle, I want some!"

I didn't believe he still had room for anything, but to avoid a fuss, I simply had Old Xue bring out another little bowl, which I split with my other imperial nephews.

Qitan ate a couple of mouthfuls and, as expected, could eat no more. He hugged his lantern and played with Qifei and the others. I was a little hungry, though, so I ate some more. While I ate, I noticed that the crown prince had actually eaten his entire bowl.

At last I knew something—the crown prince liked food that was a little sour.

I learned only later that Qitan and the others had previously slipped out of Zhong Manor. When they were discovered, the matter was reported to the palace. The consorts and concubines were horrified, and Prince Zhong himself entered the imperial presence to apologize. The late emperor said, "Some children going out to play in the street is no big deal. At their age, we were already going out hunting. Boys should see the world. As long as they are properly escorted, there is no harm in them going to the market occasionally. Call it an early experience of the plight of the common people."

It was only with the late emperor's permission that Qitan and the others had successfully snuck out that day. The empress had refused to be excluded and had immediately sent her son out as well.

Upon returning to the palace, purely over the business of eating noodles at a noodle shop, Wang You let loose with boundless praise before the late emperor, saying how deeply the crown prince shared in the joys and sorrows of the common people. The late emperor was delighted to hear it. No one looked into the matter of the crown prince having the hiccups.

Thinking back on it now, it was very funny.

But I was surprised that Qizhe still remembered that bowl of noodles.

IV.

Old Xue's hands trembled incessantly when he entered the palace, but fortunately, they steadied when he wielded knife and spatula.

Sour broth with hand-pulled noodles was a common foodstuff, with ingredients that were actually very simple. The essence lay in how the noodles were prepared and pulled.

The noodles must be smooth and chewy, pulled long and even, each one enough to fill a bowl. The noodles were immersed in sour broth, then wood ear mushrooms, daylily stalks, and fried tofu cubes were added, and finally, chopped coriander was sprinkled on top.

The noodles were brought to the emperor's bedside. Qizhe insisted on getting out of bed.

The empress dowager wouldn't let him, but the imperial physician said that it would do His Majesty good, so Qizhe sat at the table, facing the bowl of noodles, and unrestrained joy appeared on his face.

Just for a moment, he no longer seemed to be an emperor, just a child who wanted something to eat.

Before taking up his chopsticks, Qizhe said to me, "You have been kept busy because of us, Imperial Uncle. Have you eaten?"

"I ate at midday," I said.

"It is already time for dinner," said Qizhe. "You must be fatigued, Imperial Uncle. Eat these noodles with us."

Again I was taken aback.

Qizhe had already instructed the attendants to bring me a chair. The empress dowager said, "As this is His Majesty's solicitude toward Prince Huai, His Highness should not refuse."

So I thanked him. It had stopped snowing outside, and the snowbanks cast reflections on the window screens, making the evening brighter than usual. The room was as warm as the middle of spring.

The palace eunuch serving us gave me a bowl. Qizhe said, "Serve Imperial Uncle first."

"Thank you for your favor, Your Majesty, I dare not accept."

The empress dowager said, "There is no need to be reserved, Prince Huai. We're all family here."

Piping hot noodles were ladled into our bowls. Here and now, we really did seem like an ordinary uncle and nephew about to eat together.

"Your Majesty should eat first," I said.

Smiling slightly, Qizhe said, "You first."

Half kneeling, I picked up my bowl and ate some noodles, then drank some broth. Qizhe finally lifted his chopsticks and began to eat.

I accepted a napkin and dabbed my mouth. "Enjoy, Your Majesty. I will take my leave."

Qizhe looked up at me, his expression slightly startled. "Why won't you eat any more, Imperial Uncle?"

Smiling, I said, "Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty. I really am full."

Qizhe cast down his eyes. "Very well. You have spent half this day running around because of us. Go home and rest."

I donned my cloak and exited the imperial sleeping quarters. A cold wind swept snow into the corridor, with a chill that went to the bone.

V.

"Would Your Highness like to get out to eat noodles?"

Yun Yu asked me this question with a bright smile.

I let down the carriage curtain. "Suiya is making fun of me with that old story again."

"I asked the question sincerely," said Yun Yu. "This street is so magnificent, its businesses so flourishing, and all thanks to Your Highness's blessings. Your Highness ought to come here often to stroll and reminisce."

I raised my eyebrows and said, "It's thanks to His Majesty's bounteous favor. I don't dare take credit. I'd like to reminisce, but doing so on my own always feels lonely. Will you come with me, Suiya?"

Smiling, Yun Yu said, "I cannot accept this favor, Your Highness, forgive me. I have southern tastes and rarely eat noodles. Besides, I think that the noodles in this street really aren't good to eat anymore."

"Finally you're telling the truth, Suiya," I said.

Since Old Xue had gone to the palace to make that bowl of noodles for the emperor, many years had passed.

The emperor and the empress dowager had both richly rewarded Old Xue, and so his little noodle shop had instantly become a fine restaurant, packed to bursting with customers every day.

All the capital's various restaurants switched to serving Qinling flavors, putting sour soup noodles at the top of their menus.

Old Xue had three sons. They came to blows over which one would inherit the old man's mantle. Even his sons-in-law came to get in on it. That matter had come all the way to Huai Manor, where they asked me to pass judgment for them.

Old Xue couldn't stop his sons from fighting. He got so angry he had a stroke and passed away not long after.

His sons made a mess in their squabble over the family property. Finally, each of them opened a restaurant of his own. "Authentic Old Xue," "Heir to Old Xue," "Old Xue's Secret Recipe"… Each sign was flashier than the last, and more and more novelties went into the noodles—caterpillar fungus and aged ginseng, signature noodle broth made with thousand-year-old turtle…

River Snail Alley off Four Seasons Lane had changed its name to Golden Snail Road.

Every time I passed by, the name of the street dizzied me, and I hurried on.

I spent half the day drinking with Yun Yu at Yuehua Pavilion. When I left, I was a little tipsy.

Actually, I had gone out today to dodge trouble. Qitan wanted to buy the nails from a horseshoe of Xiao He's steed, which he had ridden as he chased Han Xin by moonlight.[18] A set of four at five thousand liang of silver; he had already come to Huai Manor twice.

My mother-in-law had come to see her daughter today. Mother and daughter were huddled together inside weeping bitterly, as if the princess were even now languishing in hell. In fact, I had already said that Ruru's family was welcome to come see her any time, and she could always go home to see them. But they insisted on being like this, and there was nothing I could do about it. I just made space for mother and daughter to have their cry and vent their feelings, both saying that they must not let me overhear them.

An imperial censor had submitted a memorial complaining that I was extravagant and went out nightly for entertainment. Huai Manor had nearly been ruined by Qitan; how was I supposed to afford extravagance? If I couldn't even have an occasional cup of wine and enjoy myself a little, they might as well execute me and get it over with.

Perhaps I would tell the stewards not to purchase anything for the New Year this time. Anyway, it would just be me and the princess sitting around awkwardly. Every

time she saw me, it was as if she couldn't bring herself to eat. We might as well imitate the life of the poor, pick up two jin of meat, have the kitchen make some dumplings and throw them in the pot, and have a bowl each. That would be an unconventional way to bid farewell to the old and welcome the new, and not extravagant.

Actually, the gifts I sent to the palace each year were the greatest expense. But I couldn't do without.

Well, I hadn't decided what gifts to send yet. Forget it, I would think about it some other day.

Qizhe had said to me, "Come to the palace on the night of the thirtieth, Imperial Uncle, eat New Year's Eve dinner with us."

As was customary, I thanked him and declined.

Now that I thought about it, these past couple of years, I had been invited to eat at the palace less and less. This year it had only been a few times, like the Lantern Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival. There would probably be no more invitations this year.

Sparse snow drifted through the air.

I left my sedan, dismissed my retinue, and slowly walked on alone.

For much of the day, I'd had only wine to drink and hadn't eaten anything proper. With the wind blowing on me, my stomach felt a little empty.

It was the last month again, the year nearly over. The swift passage of time always struck me as a little poignant.

At the corner, I heard someone say, "A bowl of vegetarian noodles."

The stall owner lifted the pot lid. Steam swirled up. "Do you want ginger or vinegar?"

"Vinegar."

I strolled over and sat at a small table under the awning. "A bowl of lamb noodles."

The person who had asked for vegetarian noodles looked my way, then instantly got to his feet.

I acted as if I'd just happened to spot him and, smiling, said with faint surprise, "Oh? Chancellor… Ransi. What a coincidence. You've also come to eat noodles? Why don't we sit together?"

Afterword

Hello, dear readers. Thank you very much for reading my humble work.

Allow me to introduce myself briefly. I'm an author from China. Many people often ask me the same question when they first get to know me—"Why did you choose such a pen name, 'The Gale Blows By'?"

The reason might actually sound a bit whimsical. Years ago, I was reading a novel on a literary website and got so hooked that I suddenly had the urge to give writing a try as well. It just so happened to be windy and rainy when I registered my pen name, so I spontaneously came up with this name. I didn't expect it to become my official pseudonym that I'd keep on using.

Many authors put much thought into the selection of their pen names, and they would even consult experts to ensure that it'd be an auspicious name. In comparison, mine is admittedly more casually chosen.

I used to submit short stories to magazines in the early days, but it wasn't until after I adopted the pen name, Da Feng Gua Guo, that I started serializing longer novels online. Then I had the fortune of seeing them published as physical books after the novels were completed.

The genres of my humble works are quite diverse, and they include romance novels, adventure novels, detective novels, and so on. However, I mostly write stories set in ancient China or with immortality and fantasy elements. The physical North American releases that I have the honor of seeing published this time, *Peach Blossom Debt* and *The Imperial Uncle*, are both respectively an immortal-fantasy novel and a novel set in fictional ancient China.

It should be noted that most of the settings in my novels are made up. For example, the dynasty in *The Imperial Uncle* is entirely fictional and does not exist in history. *Peach Blossom Debt*, on the other hand, borrows from the settings of traditional Chinese immortals, but the main immortal protagonist of the story, as well as some settings of the Heavenly Court and the mortal realm, are my own creations.

In fact, I was taking the lazy way out by doing this. Writing with a historical dynasty as a background would require me to do rigorous research. Attire, food, architecture, etiquette, and even the words and phrases used would have to be consistent with historical facts; otherwise, I'd make a big fool of myself if there

were any errors. It's a lot easier to make things up and borrow information from ancient times like I do…

I'm very grateful to Peach Flower House for their willingness to translate and publish *The Imperial Uncle* and *Peach Blossom Debt* in English. This is also my first time having books published in English.

I am very apprehensive about whether these two novels will be well-received by North American readers.

My humble works are set in ancient China, so the characters' names may be confusing to North American readers. In ancient China, people had a "courtesy name" in addition to their given names. Men would get their courtesy names when they came of age at twenty; in other words, they would hold a "coming of age ceremony" when they were twenty years old and obtain a "courtesy name" which they would then use. The meanings of courtesy names were generally related to those of the given names, and I have retained this custom in my writings. For example, in *The Imperial Uncle*, Jing Weiyi's courtesy name is Chengjun, Liu Tongyi's is Ransi, and Yun Yu's, Suiya. Readers unfamiliar with this cultural background may find the names confusing and perplexing.

In addition, the male protagonist in *The Imperial Uncle* would address others by their courtesy names in his interactions with them to show affection; for instance, calling Liu Tongyi, "Ransi."

In reality, courtesy names were a respectful form of address in ancient China. If the parties weren't on very familiar terms with one another, they couldn't directly call each other by their full names, but rather by courtesy names. By all reason, saying "Liu Tongyi" or "Tongyi" would be more intimate than "Ransi." Yet, due to Jing Weiyi's noble status, it's natural for him to call the others directly by their full names, while "Ransi," "Suiya" conveys a sense of respect with a touch of affection.

This might also be challenging for readers unfamiliar with the background of ancient China to grasp.

On the other hand, in *Peach Blossom Debt*, most of the main characters are referred to by their given names, with rarely any mention of their courtesy names. However, as they are all immortals, they also have an additional immortal title.

As such, I'm worried that my dear readers would find the multitude of names in my works too confusing to remember.

Nonetheless, I personally think that my novels are light-hearted, and I didn't give it too much thought when I wrote them, either. These humble works are ordinary light fiction meant to be relaxing, entertaining reads in your spare leisure time.

What left a deep impression on me during my communication with the publication staff in this collaboration was their professionalism and meticulousness.

Peach Blossom Debt and *The Imperial Uncle* were completed years ago, and I have a habit of revising my works periodically or before each publication of a book.

I'm now self-reflecting on whether this habit is necessarily correct. I myself thought that over time, my writing would perhaps be a little more mature than it was before, and that I might notice some oversights when rereading my past works.

Many readers would also offer me suggestions, especially now that readers can communicate with authors online at any time. For example, a reader once told me after reading *The Imperial Uncle* that they felt Chengjun falls in love too easily, and they hoped I could make him a little more steadfast in his feelings. Or, another reader would feel Jing Weiyi was too mean toward Yun Yu and hope the bond between them could be a little lighter, so that Yun Yu could be a little freer….

There was a period of time when I was more susceptible to influence, so I made numerous revisions to the works when presented with the opportunity to publish physical books.

For this North American version, the staff communicated with me in all earnestness, even doing a word-for-word comparison of the various versions, upon which they expressed their opinion that the earliest version was the most suitable.

I am touched by such thoroughness and meticulousness. To the North American book market, my humble works and I are new, like a blank piece of paper, which subsequently means that sales would be hard to predict. Even so, the staff treated my works with such focus and conscientiousness. Their professionalism is truly admirable.

Upon rereading, I realized that while the earliest versions had more writing flaws, the emotions conveyed were really more complete and robust. For that reason, the earliest versions of these two novels were used. There are many oversights and shortcomings in the content, and I appreciate the efforts of the translators and editors in translating and correcting them.

This version of *The Imperial Uncle* not only has the earliest, uncensored content but also the complete collection of four extras, making it the most complete physical edition to date.

This seems to align with the story—for Chengjun, the first is best.

As for *Peach Blossom Debt*, I'm sorry to say there's only one very short extra titled "The Living Immortal;" there are no other special extras. After *Peach Blossom Debt*, I wrote another story set in the same universe, *The Egg of Wishes*. I personally considered this novel to be the extra for *Peach Blossom Debt*, so I didn't write any more.

Over the years, I have written many other novels, and both my state of mind and writing style have changed. I'm worried that if I write another extra, it might not match the style of the original work.

And besides, I do feel that this novel, while not long in length, is already very complete, and I think the existing contents are sufficient.

Am I finding excuses for my laziness?

I'll leave it to you, my dear readers, to decide.

As we reach the end of this afterword, I would like to express my thanks to the editors, translators, designers, and publisher.

Thank you for your love and support for my humble works!

Of course, thank YOU too, dear reader, for your willingness to read and buy this book.

Here's to wishing you the best of luck and fortune! May your endeavors go as your heart desires!

Glossary

TranslatedTerms

courtesy name □□ biǎo zì: Given to young men when they come of age at twenty, courtesy names are a more polite form of address than a person's given name.

grand tutor □□ tài fù: Guardian of the heir to the throne, teacher of an underaged emperor, and one of the emperor's top advisors.

Imperial Censorate □□□ yù shǐ tái: Supervisory body responsible for overseeing officials and preventing corruption; the name used here follows naming conventions prior to the Ming dynasty.

imperial chancellor □□ chéng xiàng: The highest-ranking official in the imperial government.

UntranslatedTerms

Honorifics

Most titles and addresses have been rendered in English. A few without convenient English parallels have been left untouched and are explained here.

a- □: Forms an affectionate diminutive when placed before a name or one element of a name.

ge □: Older brother.

-lang □: A (young) man, sometimes used as an endearment between spouses and lovers.

-niang □: A (young) woman, sometimes used as an endearment between spouses and lovers.

-xiong □: Older brother, often used in the literal sense. A semiformal honorific used between men of similar age.

Common Words

weiqi □□: A board game also known as Go or "Chinese chess."

zongzi□□: Stuffed glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves. These are traditionally eaten during the Dragon Boat Festival.

Common Elements Used in Place Names

bei □: North.

cheng □: Town/city (e.g., Baicheng).

dong □: East.

jiang □: River.

nan □: South.

xi □: West.

zhou □: Prefecture-level city (e.g., Chengzhou).

Other Notes

"With his affections at Mount Wu engaged, what needs King Xiang in dreams to seek Jiangnan?": This line of poetry is a reference to King Xiang of Chu from the Warring States period. Song Yu's "Rhapsody of Gaotang" recounts how the king heard of a goddess who lives on Mount Wu and became infatuated with her. Mount Wu is said to be wreathed in clouds, and Jiangnan is popularly associated with its willows. Yun Yu's surname is □ ("cloud") and Liu Tongyi's is □ ("willow"). These lines use Mount Wu's clouds and Jiangnan's willows as metonymy for Yun Yu and Liu Tongyi respectively to suggest that it is Yun Yu

and not Liu Tongyi that Chengjun cares for.

Units of time: The day is divided into twelve shichen □□, which are each equivalent to two modern hours and are named after one of the twelve Earthly Branches with an equivalent zodiac animal. For example, the period between 5 a.m. and 7 a.m. is the Hour of the Rabbit. Shichen are further subdivided into marks □ kè, which vary in length but are each approximately fifteen minutes. Time is also kept after the sun sets by night watches, starting with the first watch, which is roughly equivalent to 7:15 p.m. The night is five watches in total, continuing until roughly 5 a.m.

Units of weight: The jin □ has varied in weight over time but can be taken to be about 1.3 pounds, or just over half a kilogram. The liang □ is one sixteenth of a jin. It is commonly used as a measure for currency in monetary transactions.

Notes

[←1] Historically, Chinese emperors went by a variety of names and titles. Here, Mingzong is a temple name (a posthumous honor), while Tongguang is the name for the period of the emperor's rule. In dynasties where a single era name covered an emperor's entire rule, like the fictional dynasty in this novel, the emperor was known by that era name during his rule and often after death.

[←2]

Cutsleeve is slang for male homosexuality originating in accounts of the relationship between Emperor Ai of Han and Dong Xian; one story describes Emperor Ai cutting his sleeve to avoid disturbing Dong Xian, who had fallen asleep lying on it.

[←3]

Bai Juyi, courtesy name Letian, was a popular Tang dynasty poet, whose best-known works include Chang Hen Ge (“Song of Everlasting Regret”).

[←4]

The Shang and Zhou were early Chinese royal dynasties. King Zhou of Shang was the last king of the Shang dynasty, while King Wen of Zhou, in life the Count of Zhou, was posthumously honored as the Zhou dynasty's founder.

[←5]

The eight immortals are Daoist deities, each of whom has a distinctive divine power and motif. Popular imagery depicts them crossing the sea or attending the Queen Mother of the West's birthday feast, where they eat the peaches of immortality.

[←6]

Lü Buwei was chancellor to King Zhuangxiang of Qin during the warring states period. Lady Zhao was a dancing girl in Lü Buwei's home who married Zhuangxiang.

[←7]

Ying Zheng was Zhuangxiang's son by Lady Zhao, and the first Chinese ruler to take on the title of emperor, styled Qin Shi Huang, "first emperor of Qin."

[←8]

This line references King Xiang of Chu from the Warring States period. Song Yu's "Rhapsody of Gaotang" recounts how the king heard of a goddess who lives on Mount Wu and became infatuated with her.

[←9]

These items all relate to semi-fictionalized historical figures and incidents that appear in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms.*

[←10]

Mount Wu is said to be wreathed in clouds, and Jiangnan is popularly associated with its willows. Yun Yu's surname is □ ("cloud") and Liu Tongyi's is □ ("willow").

[←11]

Seumnida is a verb suffix used in Korean to denote formality, which might be picked up by a merchant visiting Goryeo, a historical state of Korea.

[←12]

The “cai” in Zhao Cai means wealth, and Zhao Cai altogether sounds similar to “inviting wealth.” “Jiawang” means “a prosperous household.”

[←13]

"Shuibo" and "Shuishen" are both common and interchangeable terms for the god of local waterways.

[←14]

The “yong” in this name is the character that means “mediocre,” and the whole name Mei Yong sounds similar to the word “useless.”

[←15]

The hypothetical names here translate to something like “Third Dog” and “Fourth Cat”; naturally it isn’t a good idea to imply that the emperor is related to people with such names.

[←16]

The Laba Festival is celebrated on the eighth day of the last month of the Chinese calendar and marks the beginning of the New Year period. Vinegar-soaked garlic, called Laba garlic, is traditionally eaten during the festival, especially in northern China.

[←17]

Meng Po Soup is served to dead souls in the underworld on their way to reincarnation, which causes them to forget their previous lives so they can be reborn without burdens.

[←18]

Shortly preceding the founding of the Han dynasty, Xiao He was an advisor to the future emperor who chased after Han Xin so he could take him back to court to recommend him as general.